

## something special by faintlystrange

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Angst, Angst with a Happy Ending, Anxiety, Canon Gay Character, Crying, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Happy Ending, Homophobic Language, Idk just gays being emotional and tender that's it, Implied/Referenced Character Death, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, M/M, Mental Health Issues, No graphic or overt homophobia! Just mentions of it, Not Really Character Death, Panic Attacks, Period-Typical Homophobia, Porn with Feelings, Post-Canon, Post-Season/Series 03, Temporary Character Death, Trauma, Vomiting

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

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**Summary:**

Steve remembers them lying side by side in his backyard, so close he could feel the hair on Billy's arm touch his. He remembers turning his head to look at Billy, only to find that Billy was already looking at him, eyes hooded and smile lazy. He remembers them kissing, slow and sweet and a little desperate, Billy's calloused hands cradled around his cheeks like he was something special.

# 1. Chapter 1

## Author's Note:

This is the first chapter of what is already a long and winding exploration of Billy and Steve's relationship, post-season three. I originally intended for this to be a 5 + 1, but it completely got away from me. Ah well. I hope it's enjoyable, nevertheless! More notes at the end!

(Also, Billy isn't really dead. Steve and everyone else just think he is. For now.)

Summer went by fast, after everything.

Hopper was gone. Will and El and Joyce and Jonathan were gone. The Russians were gone. The Mind Flayer was gone.

Billy was gone.

Everyone tried to move on. It was all they could ever do. Move on and tell no one and do their best to forget about what happened. The kids went to the old movie theatre in town, the one that once had "Nancy The Slut Wheeler" scrawled across its sign in messy red spray paint. They sat in the chilled interior, holding greasy tubs of popcorn between their thighs, clutching each other in the dark. Max next to Lucas next to Dustin next to Mike. Sometimes Erica joined them, poking at Dustin and ignoring her brother entirely. Sometimes Nancy went, just to laugh a little bit. Forget herself. Sometimes Steve tagged along rather than just dropping them off, scolding the kids when they started throwing popcorn and dishing out the money to buy everyone popsicles when the movie ended.

They'd all sit on the curb by his car, around the corner from the

theatre. The kids would lick sticky melt off the sides of their hands and pant in the early evening heat.

Steve would look down the alley and remember Nancy slapping him. Remember the sharp sound of it, and how cold her hands felt against his skin. He'd remember his fist slamming Jonathan onto the ground, and Nancy screaming.

Nancy would look down the alley and remember crying. The sound of a car approaching. Jonathan's shins hitting cold metal as the deputy pulled his wrists into handcuffs.

And then it was fall, and the kids started high school.

They heard from El and the Byers' every weekend, Steve and Nancy and the kids gathering around the phone in Mike's basement to catch up. El would rattle to Max about everything, and tell Mike she loved him until everyone was tired of it. Will would shyly tell them about a budding friendship, and about how he and El spruced up his bike. All the kids would ask Jonathan about his new photography job, and if he'd taken pictures of any famous people all the way out there in big city, Indianapolis. Joyce would make sure to ask how everyone was doing, and they'd all promise to visit each other soon before the choruses of goodbyes and the click of Mike putting the phone back on the hook.

Robin and Steve got those jobs at the video store after all. They worked there for the rest of the summer, and then into the fall. Robin started up at the local community college in September, taking enough classes to get by. She was one of the smartest people in her and Steve's graduating class, but her high school grades didn't much reflect that. She was too distractible and eager to learn about anything and everything other than what her teachers wanted her to learn. Besides, she plans to rack up some credits for a year, make some tuition money, and then transfer to a university out of state.

She wants to see someplace outside of Hawkins.

But for now, she works at the video store every day after she finishes classes. Robin and Steve and Keith have the long evening shift, from late afternoon to when the store closes up at around 9 pm. The morning shift girls hate Keith so much they barely stick around past 3, and Robin is usually running late from class, so they never so much as exchange a glance. But Steve loves to tease her about how hot they are, and how much she's missing out.

Steve is always early to his shift. He works mornings at his dad's business a few blocks over in town, filing papers and entering data and generally having a mindless, soul-sucking time. He doesn't get paid for it, but his dad, who is more often than not out of town and not in the office at all, says it's "good life experience" to learn the "ins and outs" of a business. Whatever that means. Steve finishes there at 2:30, grabs two sandwiches from the deli around the corner, and meanders over to the video store. When Robin gets there, typically sweaty and sprinting through the front at 3:15, they sit at the counter and munch on late lunches of roast beef and turkey and wait for the flood of kids that mean school's let out.

Today, like many days, Robin and Steve go to his place after work. She awkwardly wrangles her bike into the back of his beemer, kicks her converse up on his dash, and complains about how her tween sister is driving the family crazy, and how she can't possibly be in the house right now. Steve knows she just wants to keep him company, and he isn't going to argue with her. His house is empty, and having Robin there almost makes it feel like a home. Besides, Robin said once with a grin; her parents think the two of them are dating, and they actively encourage her to "stay over at Stevie's house." Steve'd spit out his cherry coke.

Today, they settle comfortably into their regular routine. Steve digs in his cabinets until he can find something suitable for a late dinner, and Robin drags chairs around in the backyard so they can sit outside by the pool. Usually, they go for canned soup. Sometimes it's

leftovers if Steve's mom was home the night before to cook. Tonight it's cereal.

They use up the last of the milk, draining it over their Cinnamon Toast Crunch as they watch breeze blow over the water. It's starting to get too cold to sit outside, and soon they'll have to transition these dinners to Steve's kitchen, but neither of them seems too bothered by the persistent early autumn chill.

Steve crunches through his food silently, thinking about everything, and feels Robin's eyes on him. She's stirring her spoon around in her bowl.

"You should eat that," he garbles around his mouthful. "It's gonna get gross and soggy."

Robin rolls her eyes. "How many times do I have to tell you that I like it that way? Not all of us enjoy cutting our perfectly nice gums on the corners of cereal knives."

"Cereal knives?" Steve repeats with a raised eyebrow.

"You know what I mean."

They lapse back into silence. Another soft wind blows through the backyard and the grass ripples like waves. Robin takes a tentative bite before putting her spoon back down.

"Are you okay?" she asks, after a moment. She looks at Steve carefully. "You've been kind of quiet. Not that there's anything wrong with quiet," she quickly amends. "Usually, you're chewing my ear off complaining about the office. And I appreciate a good bit of silence as much as the next girl, but you know..." she trails off, looking abashed.

Steve swallows, and the bite goes down thick in his throat.

"I'm good, I guess." He shrugs. "I'm fine. It's all been. A lot. You know." He doesn't elaborate. There's a pause. Steve opens and closes his mouth a few times, the air catching in his throat. Robin waits. She knows it sometimes takes a second to find the words, so she looks away and lets him take his time. She spoons some dripping cereal

into her mouth.

“It’s just that...” Steve starts suddenly, then breaks off.

He looks around, as if searching for something to grab onto, then sets his bowl down on the little side table. He drags long fingers through his hair, and they come away warm and slightly tacky with product.

“I understand why Ms. Byers had to move away. It was hard for her and Will to be here, and everything. A lot of bad shit happened in their house, and sometimes it’s good to start over. I know that. And I understand why they took El with them. Who else would have looked after her?” His expression clouds, briefly, before he shakes it off.

“And of course Jonathan had to go. I mean. Yeah.” Steve moves like he’s going to stand up, and start pacing, but then he settles back down. Robin watches him closely. She’s seen him get like this before. Restless. Unsettled. It’s hard to watch because she doesn’t think she can do much to help. She can’t get rid of all the thoughts buzzing around in his head, too fast and slippery for him to grab onto. She just turns towards him a little more in her chair and hopes he knows that she’s there to listen.

“The one thing that doesn’t sit well with me though,” Steve continues. “And I mean. Really feels wrong. Is that...” Steve looks down and scratches long and hard along his palm.

“Is that. I don’t know. Is that Billy is gone, I guess.” He scrubs a hand over his forehead and looks up at Robin. He makes eye contact with her, for the first time all night, and boy, does he look afraid. There’s something deep in his eyes, something haunted and hidden, and Robin wants to sucker punch whatever or whoever’s been making Steve feel like this under her watch. But instead, she crosses one leg over the other, balancing her bowl on one knee, and tries to be understanding.

“What do you mean?” Robin asks gently, ducking her head a bit to catch Steve’s eyes again.

“I mean...I don’t know what I mean.” Steve rubs his palms over his thighs once, twice, and settles on the edge of the chair, left knee

bouncing.

“Billy once beat the shit out of me, okay? He really just fucking beat the shit out of me. It was last year, and all sorts of horrible crap was happening. And I was trying to protect the kids, and he drove up angry, and he sort of took all of it out on me, I guess.”

“And Billy was an asshole before, you know? Before all the stuff with the Mind Flayer. Always roaring around in that god awful Camaro of his, smoking and slapping people around and terrorizing Max and the kids. So I never really liked the guy, to begin with. But then after I got beat up, Max stood up to him. And I guess she told him to back the fuck off, or else. From what I’ve heard, it was something to see.”

“After that...” Steve takes a deep breath and lets it out through pursed lips. “I don’t know, Robin. I guess he was different. Less abrasive. More reserved. I started seeing him around more, when I drove Max home from school or picked her up to go hang out with the brats. He’d just look at me through the windshield, or from down the hall in his house, and he wouldn’t say anything. He’d just look at me.”

“And then over winter break, a few months after all the shit ended and things started to get half normal again, he came to my house. He knocked on my door like a real person and didn’t even ask if he could come in, he just stood there. And apologized.”

Robin gapes. She tries not to interrupt, she really does, but Steve hears her breath, and he glances up.

“I know, I know,” he mumbles, looking away. “That’s what I thought too, all right? I mean, who did he think he was? But he just stood there and wouldn’t look at me and apologized for breaking my nose and being a grade-A asshole and for all the other shit he did. And he barely let me get a word in edgewise. Then he just got back in his car and drove away.”

“At first I wanted to say fuck that, one apology wasn’t going to make up for everything. But then I started thinking about it. About Billy. He had no one. His dad routinely beat the shit out of him, which I know, I know, isn’t an excuse to be the way Billy was. But he really

had no one. And I don't know. I guess I was always intrigued by him, a little."

Steve leans back in his chair and looks up at the sky. There are a few stars out, and if he squints, he can make out some sort of formation through the trees.

"When you go through life or death shit like what we went through, it really helps straighten out your priorities," he says quietly. "And if Billy was pushing past all his macho bullshit and actually apologizing to me, I wanted to assume he was being sincere, you know? If that came back to bite me in the ass, so be it." Steve chews down on his lip, and his eyes go somewhere else. A memory, maybe. Robin breathes out long and slow through her nose, thinking.

"So, did it?"

Steve blinks and rolls his head towards her. "Did what?"

"Did it come back to bite you in the ass?" Robin asks, entirely serious. Steve chuckles, but it's humorless.

"That's the crazy thing," he says, mouth full of teeth. "It didn't. It really didn't."

Steve doesn't like to remember, because remembering hurts. But he can't help it. He remembers the first time they sat together on the back field after basketball practice. It was cold out. Steve had been on the way to his car, hair dripping wet from the shower, when he saw Billy in the middle of the field, cigarette smoke curling up from his shadowed figure. Steve still doesn't know what made him go over there, but he did. They'd sat together in silence, Billy smoking, Steve picking at grass, flinching every time a drop of water fell on the back of his neck, or between his eyebrows.

Steve remembers seeing Billy standing against his car before school one day, hands folded under his armpits against the chill. Steve had waved, compulsively, even though they weren't really friends. He remembers Billy waving back, tentatively, as if the movement was



foreign to him.

Steve remembers the first time Billy showed up at his house late at night; knuckles cracked, fingers curled into fists, a bruise blooming across his cheekbone.

He remembers when Billy sat across from Steve at lunch. Nancy and Jonathan had been in the darkroom, so he was alone. Billy took a bite of his apple, and, with no preamble, started telling Steve about some book he was reading for history class. Steve sat in silence as he listened to Billy ramble for twenty minutes, unsure if this was supposed to be a conversation. He remembers Billy asking a question, and both of them looking up from their food at the same time. He remembers thinking that he'd never seen Billy's eyes before, not in the daylight. They were startlingly clear and light. He'd expected them to be brown, or even black. But they were blue. He'd cleared his throat and answered the question, but it felt like something had shifted, after that.

Steve remembers the two of them in his car after school, driving. They went to the diner and sat across from each other, and Billy ate Steve's pickles because he doesn't like them, and their knees knocked lightly under the sticky table. He remembers making some dumb joke, and seeing Billy smile, and noticing for the first time that only his top row of teeth show when he smiles and that it lit up his whole face like a beacon. Steve remembers feeling his stomach drop out of his body.

Steve remembers them lying side by side on this very grass in his backyard, so close he could feel the hair on Billy's arm touch his. He remembers turning his head to look at Billy, only to find that Billy was already looking at him, eyes hooded and smile lazy. He remembers them kissing, slow and sweet and a little desperate, Billy's calloused hands cradled around his cheeks like he was something special. Steve remembers clutching Billy's jacket, his shirt, his wrists - anything he could get his hands on - like Billy was the only thing keeping him tethered to the ground.

"Steve." Robin's hand is warm on his, and her voice is soft. He hasn't been breathing, he realizes, and he sucks in the crisp air. "Do you-"

"I think I loved him," Steve bursts out, face twisting in pain. "I know how stupid that sounds, but I think I loved him." He presses his face into his hands, elbows on his knees, and his chest shudders as he tries to breathe.

"No, Steve," Robin soothes quickly. Her mind is spinning. She pulls Steve's head up and presses it against her stomach, knees knocking against the arm of his chair. She threads her fingers through his hair and traces them across his cheek. "No. It's not stupid at all."

They stay there a while, Robin pressing Steve close enough so that he can feel the breath entering and leaving her body. Steadily, and rhythmic, like a slow, sad song. He has himself half wrapped around her; wrists tilted awkwardly so that he can hold her forearms with his fingers, desperate for someone to grab onto. Steve's tears dry cold on his face as the wind picks up, and he feels Robin start to shiver against him. He wipes his nose on the sleeve of his sweater and slowly disentangles himself from Robin's arms.

"Come on," he says, his voice hoarse. "You're shivering. Let's go inside."

"I'm fine-" Robin starts, but she's interrupted by a chill that shakes its way through her body.

"You're not fine." Steve stands. "It's way too cold to be out here. I don't know what I was thinking." He pulls Robin close to him, and she trembles, his warm breath fanning across her face.

"Steve..." Robin starts as they make their way back towards the house, leaving their half-eaten cereal bowls.

"I'm fine, Robin." He smiles at her, but there's a tightness to it, and his eyes aren't as bright as usual. He's embarrassed, Robin thinks.

"I know you're fine, dingus. I just want to say that I love you. And thank you. For sharing."

"Oh," Steve says dumbly, and Robin swears there's a tremble to his lips that he wipes away with a hand. "I love you too."

Robin smiles easily and pulls an arm out from under Steve so she can

sling it around his shoulders. They go inside, into the dark warmth. Robin leads Steve through the house, her hand soft and dry in his.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I have to be honest - I have always been very conflicted about Billy/Steve as a pairing for reasons I won't get into, but after season three I couldn't get this out of my head. And then I started writing, and I haven't stopped, and there's already thousands upon thousands of words to this story, and I have no idea where it's going or when it's going to end.

That's all to say: whether or not anyone actually wants more of whatever this is, I will be posting more. If it matters to anyone, Billy will not stay dead in this story, and there will be some legitimate Billy/Steve interaction in the future.

If you've gotten this far, thank you very much for reading! If you have thoughts, I would love comments!

Also side note: I now realize, after writing this entire fic, that Robin and Steve aren't in the same grade like I thought and that she's younger than him. Omfg. Please try to ignore my dumb mistake.

## 2. Chapter 2

### Notes for the Chapter:

Content warning: vague descriptions of vomiting, panic attacks, and a short, non-graphic scene involving a character in a hospital bed.

When Steve finds out, he's with Robin.

Robin and Lucas and Dustin and Mike, all in the living room of his house, watching some no-name sci-fi movie on TV. There's candy everywhere and about a thousand blankets and the room is dark, even though it's early afternoon. Dustin had insisted that Steve shut all the blinds to make it feel like a real theater, so Steve dutifully clambered around the couch fort in the center of the room, pulling strings until it was appropriately dim.

They're almost at the end of the movie when Steve's phone rings. He frowns. People don't usually call his house. Unless they're looking for his parents, of course, but people had stopped calling for his parents years ago when it became apparent that they were never home. Steve slides Robin off where she's leaning against his legs, ignoring her protests, and fumbles his way to the wall in the low light.

"Hello? Harrington residence."

"Hey, Steve. It's me."

Max. She'd backed out of today's weekly movie night yesterday, claiming that she and Susan were going somewhere, but she hadn't said where. Steve was initially suspicious, but then he remembered that Neil wasn't around anymore, so when Max said she was going somewhere with her mom, she was most likely just going somewhere with her mom. But then again. She sounds nervous on the phone. Hesitant. Which is so unlike her that Steve feels something ugly begin to curdle in his chest.

“Max. What’s up?” He forces out. “Is everything okay?”

Lucas glances over at the sound of Max’s name, but he turns back to the TV when Steve waves him away. There’s no use worrying the kids if he isn’t even sure anything’s wrong.

“Yeah, yeah,” Max says a little too quickly. “Everything’s...good, I guess. Really good.” Something in her voice changes then, and Steve can tell she’s being honest. She’s smiling.

“I just. I have to tell you something. Important. Something I should’ve told you a long time ago, but they told me not too, and that it wouldn’t be fair to you or anyone else, and that I should wait until everything was okay, or at least until he was okay to see you, and I wanted to tell you straight away—I really did—but I was scared, and-”

“Max!” Steve interrupts sharply. His throat feels rubbed raw, and he readjusts his grip on the phone where his hands have suddenly gone sweaty. “Tell me what?”

“That Billy’s alive,” Max rushes out as if saying it quickly will make it feel any less like Steve’s just gotten all the air pushed out of his chest.

Steve starts to float after she says that. Distantly, he wonders why Max even reached out to him. Had Billy told her something? Does she know?

Even more distantly, he hears Max stumble over the story of how, as the paramedics were loading Billy’s lifeless body into the ambulance; he’d started to breathe again. How they had no time to tell anyone. How Sam Owens and his men rushed Billy to the hospital. How it had taken a few horrific days to stabilize him, and how as soon as they could, they transferred him to a private facility, a little bit outside Hawkins. How Dr. Owens called Max’s house and how she’d answered. How she’d screamed, and dropped the phone, and how her mother caught her as she went down.

Steve barely hears Max explain that the next few months were a living hell, with Billy floating in and out of consciousness, and all the

surgeries, and Neil leaving, and then all the therapy, and healing. Steve thinks he responds when Max apologizes over and over for keeping this from him for so long, but he can't be sure. He feels so far away from his body. So very far away.

Steve hardly notices when Max rattles off an address and only catches snippets of her telling him that Billy asked to see him and that she wants him to come there, to the facility. As soon as he can. Steve absently feels himself hanging up, the phone settling back on the hook with a resounding click.

He can sense the kids and Robin standing up, asking him questions, asking him if he's okay, but it's like he's underwater, and their faces and voices are blurry and blue. Steve feels his stomach clench, and he tastes acidity rising up his throat, and then he's hurtling blindly towards the bathroom. His hands find the cold toilet seat, and his knees hit the tile with a hard *crack*, and then he's vomiting, and he can't breathe.

Steve isn't aware of how much time has passed before he feels hands on his shoulders, and something cold and wet on his neck. Robin's voice fades in and out, and he thinks she's saying something. Or maybe she's singing.

Eventually, Steve's knees start to smart, and he doesn't think he has anything left in him, so he lets himself fall back on his butt against the wall. He opens his eyes to see Robin there in front of him, eyes swimming, worry painted across her face.

"It's-" he starts, but his throat clicks dryly, painfully, and he can't get anything else out. Robin pushes a glass of cool water into his hands, and he drinks it, slowly, until he can feel his muscles unclenching.

"It's Billy," Steve says, closing his eyes. It's like saying it out loud makes it real all of a sudden, and Steve crashes back into himself with a sickening jolt. "He's alive."

Robin had wanted to drive him, but Steve wouldn't let her. Someone

had to watch the kids, he'd said as he stumbled around his bedroom, shucking off his sweaty, bitter-smelling clothes. Someone had to watch the kids.

The kids who Robin had shoved out the back door before running after Steve into the bathroom. She'd ordered them to stay outside, or else, so that she could take care of Steve, and so they wouldn't know.

The kids who crowded in the living room after Robin let them back inside, worried and asking a million questions. She'd told them there was an emergency, and that Steve had to go, and that no one was hurt, but that he just really had to go. And when Steve thundered down the stairs in a new shirt, and Robin grabbed his wrist before he could dart out the door, and ordered him to be careful, he had to struggle against tears.

And now Steve is driving along wooded back roads, following the few vague scraps of Max's directions that he managed to remember. His hands are so tight on the steering wheel he thinks his skin might rub right off, and it is taking everything in his willpower to not succumb to the panic he feels pushing against his sternum. He needs to drive. He needs to be strong. He needs to hold it together. He can make it.

He can make it.

It takes three hours for Steve to get from the front of the facility to Billy's room. He's stopped at the gate, and then at the door. He's scanned, prodded, has his ID checked dozens of times, decontaminated, scanned again. Interviewed, mildly threatened, stared at. He's left alone in a square room for half an hour during which a small camera tracks his every movement. Steve understands the need for security. He understands all of it, he does. It's just that he's panicking the whole time, and all the waiting leaves him too much time to think. To stress about what to say to Billy, to question whether or not Billy actually wants him there. Whether or not Billy actually wants him, at all.

Because Steve loves Billy. He knows that, now. He's had time to come to terms with that. And sure, they've kissed. They've held each other.

They've gone on what you could call dates. They've spent hours and hours with only each other for company. But they've never really said anything about it.

Sometimes Steve questions whether any of it was real, or if it was all an elaborate hallucination his mind fabricated to help him cope with his desire.

But then he remembers that Max knows...something. And Max wouldn't know something if there wasn't something to know. So, after three long hours, Steve squares his shoulders, runs a hand through his hair and knocks softly on the door to Billy's room.

"Come in," calls a quiet voice, quieter than Steve thinks he's ever heard Max speak.

He turns the knob. He steps inside.

There's a rustle, like someone shifting on a mattress, and then the door swings all the way open and there he is. Billy Hargrove.

He's propped up against stark white pillows on a bed, so big his feet are a foot from the end of it. There's an IV stuck in the crook of his arm, and some kind of clear liquid flowing into his body through a long tube. A blue, lumpy, knitted blanket covers his legs and pools around his waist. Billy looks smaller, like he's lost weight and muscle mass, and the patterned hospital gown is boxy on his shoulders. The bits of skin Steve can see between the blanket and Billy's sleeves are still a golden shade of tan, as if the sun had followed him into his hospital room, but his arms are slashed with pale scars.

Steve glances over to where Max is curled into a stiff-looking chair next to the bed; legs tucked up underneath her. It's easier to look at her than to look at Billy. Steve can't look at Billy's face, not yet.

Max has her index finger stuck in a book. She'd been reading to Billy, Steve realizes, and something twists inside him. She looks up at him and smiles a little, nodding her encouragement.

*Go on*, she mouths, nodding again towards Billy, and apparently, that's what Steve's been waiting for, because he takes a few tentative



steps across the room until he's standing by Billy's side, looking down.

Billy's hair is short—almost buzzed—like the doctors shaved it all off and it's just started to grow back. His face is stubbly and his lips and cheeks are red and he looks real. Alive. Unlike when Steve had last seen him: pale and grey and otherworldly, bleeding black and looking for all the world like a dead man.

And then they're looking at each other and Billy's eyes are just as clear as Steve remembers, the color of the very edge of the ocean, where the water floats soft and slow over pale sand.

And then Billy is reaching up and grabbing Steve's hand in his, and Steve is grabbing back like it's a lifeline, and Billy's palms are cold and rough and a little tacky, just like Steve remembers.

And when Billy smiles up at Steve, eyes shimmering, his teeth so bright they hurt a little to look at, it feels like something within Steve starts running again, smooth and humming.

Steve drops to his knees, clinging to Billy's hand, his thigh, the hospital gown—anything he can get his hands on—and he cries. Oh, does he cry.

At some point Max leaves, very quietly, shutting the door behind her, and Billy strokes Steve's hair, and he's crying too, stomach rolling against Steve's forehead with each stilted breath. They clutch each other, and they cry, and Steve feels reborn.

And when they can't cry anymore, Billy drags Steve up by the neck of his shirt and cradles Steve's wet face in his palms, just like he'd done the first time. When they kiss, it tastes like tang, and salt, and mint, and Steve's heart beats fast and fast and fast.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I will be updating the tags on this as I go as not to

spoil anything, so don't be surprised if they change!

As always, I am nourished by comments and I love discourse :)

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Notes for the Chapter:

Quick heads up: the first few sections of this chapter are from Billy's POV and the entire scene in Billy's house is from Steve's POV. I have no idea why I did that lol but it is what it is

Billy leaves the facility in early spring.

At first, he doesn't tell anyone that he's being discharged. He's eighteen, and his doctors have to let him do what he wants, even if they're clearly not happy about it.

Billy doesn't tell Max, because she has school, and he doesn't want her skipping for him. And he can't tell Susan, because she has work. Susan, who isn't even his mother. Susan, who was thrown into this shitfest head on with nothing to hold onto, who can barely look Billy in the eye because sometimes he looks just like his dad.

Billy plans to walk until he can catch a bus, and ride the bus until he figures out what to do next. But then the morning of his discharge arrives, and Billy realizes that he hasn't been past the front gate of the facility in months. He's forgotten what the outside looks like. And apparently it's a bad day, because his head is cottony and his legs feel stiff and weak, and he doesn't think he'd make it to the end of the block even if he tried. So Billy swallows down his flush of pride and calls Steve.

Steve's mouth is set in a tight line the whole drive. He glances over at Billy in the passenger seat about fifteen times in the first five minutes, then goes back to staring out the front windshield in silence, fingers tense on the wheel.

Billy doesn't have to ask to know why Steve's upset. He's mad that

Billy didn't just ask him for help in the first place. Mad that Billy was going to risk his health and safety by doing something reckless on his first day out. Mad that after everything they've been through, Billy can't just *trust* him. Billy can hear Steve saying it, mouth clipping over the words. *How could you do something so stupid, Billy? Why would you do something so stupid?*

Billy tries not to curl further into his facility-issued sweats. He can't tell if it's actually cold outside, or if his body is just unaccustomed to anything other than an evenly regulated temperature of his room, but he thinks he's shivering.

Steve glances over at Billy again, then back to the road. He reaches down and turns up the thermostat. Billy wants to thank him, but the words stick in his throat. The trees of Hawkins whisk by, fresh and wet and new, and Billy tries not to hurl as the car skips over the long, empty road.

Steve helps Billy into his house, an arm slung underneath his shoulder so Steve can take some of his weight. Billy tenses when Steve touches him, his whole body going sharp and straight like a metal rod, and the second they shuffle awkwardly through the front door, he disappears into his room. Billy doesn't slam the door - that's the type of behavior Neil wouldn't have tolerated in his house - but it's a close thing.

Steve is left standing there dumbly in the hallway, Billy's lone bag slung over his shoulder. He tries to ignore the sting that lights up in his chest. Billy's been through hell, and Steve can't be mad at him for not acting or reacting rationally. It's not personal. Billy would be rejecting anyone who tried to show him compassion right now. It's in his nature. To deny help, and to push people away, and to do everything on his own. He's accustomed to having no *people*. No support, no one to help him through his struggles. No one to talk to, not really. It's not personal.

Half in a daze, Steve finds himself in the kitchen, making coffee. He doesn't know why he's doing it. He doesn't even know if Billy likes coffee. They've never talked about it. Steve just lets his hands lead,

his brain lazing foggily behind, dumping grounds into the machine, adding water. Waiting. Pouring two steaming cups, tipping a bit of sugar and cream into each, because somewhere in the back of his mind he figures Billy could use something sweet. Picking up a mug in each hand and walking down the shadowy hall towards Billy's bedroom.

Steve jolts back to himself when coffee splashes over the rim of one of the cups and onto his hand. He sucks in sharply, then lets out the breath slowly as the pain evaporates. It's enough to make him conscious of what he's doing, and what he's about to face, and spark some nerves within him, even though he has nothing to be nervous about. It's just Billy.

When Steve gets to Billy's door he toes it open, nudging it slowly with his foot until there's a space big enough for him to squeeze through. Steve expects Billy to be looking at him, or faced away, but when he steps inside Billy's sat right in front of the door, on the edge of his bed.

Steve is about to say something - ask Billy why he'd run away, or how he's doing, or anything to get Billy to *talk to him for one goddamn second* - but then he looks at Billy. *Really* looks at him. He sees the line of Billy's back, no longer stiff, but limp and curved. He sees the way Billy's fingers dig into his thighs where his hands are pressed against his legs, deep and hard, knuckles turned white. He sees the way Billy ducks his neck, hiding behind a flop of hair that is no longer there. He sees the blankness of Billy's face, an expression he only wears when he's trying his best not to feel anything at all.

Something sorrowful rises from deep in Steve's chest, but he pushes it down. He kicks off his shoes and pads across the room as quietly as he can before gently sitting down beside Billy, a respectful half a foot between them on the bed. Steve holds out one of the mugs silently, not really expecting Billy to take it, but after a moment it's being pulled from his hands, and held in Billy's palms so tightly Steve's afraid it might shatter.

They sit in silence. Steve slowly sip his way through half his coffee, watching Billy out of the corner of his eye. Billy doesn't drink once, but Steve can feel him relaxing, minutely, the warmth from the mug

seeping into his tense hands.

And then something in the air changes, and Billy's fingers start to shake, ever so slightly. Steve gently takes the mug from him and puts it on the side-table, along with his own, and the second he turns back Billy closes the small gap between them and leans his head against Steve's shoulder, their bodies flush together.

Billy's short hair tickles Steve's neck, and the room smells bitter and earthy, like coffee and old cigarettes, and Steve carefully takes Billy's shaky hands in his.

"I'm sorry," Billy whispers, breaking the silence. His voice is somehow both hoarse and wet, and Steve rubs a soothing circle into the back of Billy's hand with his thumb.

"There's nothing to be sorry for," Steve says, and he means it. He'd been upset, earlier. Hurt. But Billy couldn't help it, just like Steve can't help when he starts to panic, and the days when he feels so heavy he can barely move.

"I was an ass to you for no reason," Billy bites. He takes a breath, and when he speaks again, it's softer. More measured. "All you're trying to do is help, and I'm being an ass."

Steve huffs. "For one, ass is your default personality, so don't think this is anything out of the ordinary." He nudges Billy with his shoulder, and he feels Billy's cheek move as he smiles a little.

"And Billy." Steve sounds serious. "I mean it. I understand. Probably more than you even know. It's okay. We're going to get through this, and I'm not going anywhere. You can't get rid of me no matter what you do, okay?"

The muscles in Billy's jaw tick in a way that suggests that Steve hit the nail right on the head, but he doesn't lash out. Instead, he sighs, deeply, and lifts his head off Steve's shoulder to look him straight in the eyes.

"Okay," Billy agrees, and Steve gives him a blinding smile. He grabs Billy's cheeks with a sudden force, and kisses his forehead, loud and

wet.

“I love you,” he says, resounding, and firm. And because they both know Billy can’t say it back - isn’t ready to say it back, not yet - there’s no pressure. No awkwardness.

“I know,” Billy says cheekily, and Steve smacks him, then pulls him close.

“I know you know,” Steve murmurs into Billy’s neck. “I know.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Short and sweet!

I haven't made a decision about how I'm going to end this piece, but there are many ideas for future chapters/scenes/interactions floating around in my head, so I'm just letting the story take me where it wants to go :)

P.S. comments bring me joy!

## 4. Chapter 4

### Notes for the Chapter:

Content warning: Description of a panic attack towards the end of the chapter.

Somehow, too soon, it is summer again.

Robin is done with her year at the local college and will be heading to California in the fall to finish her degree. She could have had her pick of places, but, as she told Steve one day at work, there's just something about the weather and the waves that calls to her.

The kids are back to roaming the streets of Hawkins, looking for trouble. None of them have jobs yet, not really.

Lucas occasionally mows neighbors' lawns for a bit of pocket change. Keith sometimes lets Dustin help Steve and Robin out during their shift at the video store, earning him a few bucks here and there. Mike spends a lot of time on the phone, talking to El and Will, planning next month's visit. He sits in the basement for hours, phone cord wrapped around his arms and legs, until Karen calls him up for dinner or until Nancy gets home from her job assisting Florence at the station and joins him on the floor.

Max has been getting Billy to drive her to the skate shop in the next town over a few times a week so she can stare at all the boards she can't afford and beg the staff to let her work there. They keep telling her that she's only fifteen (soon to be sixteen, she makes sure to mention) and that they can't hire her for this type of work. And that they don't need help. But she's still pushing and needling. According to Billy, she thinks they're going to give in soon.

Steve marvels at how good the kids have been with everything. He shouldn't be surprised - they've survived worse and will continue to survive worse - but they mostly took the news about Billy being alive calmly and with grace. That doesn't mean that they love him or



anything - Lucas still gives Billy the stink eye when he goes anywhere with Max, and Mike can't stop remembering how easily Billy had lifted El clean off the floor, crushing her throat, and he can't stop hearing her panicked gasps and screams - but they're making progress.

The kids are smart enough to distinguish the real Billy from the one possessed by the monster, and to separate possessed-Billy's actions from real-Billy's actions, but that still leaves them to reckon with everything he'd done before the Mind Flayer got to him. Terrorizing the kids. Scaring Lucas half to death. Beating up Steve.

Which is why, when Billy first proposes they have a little pool party at Steve's house for Mike's birthday, he laughs in Billy's face. But then Max gets involved and convinces Steve it's a good idea. That way, the others can see Billy act like a normal person, and see how much he's changed, *right*?

"Fine," Steve had relented. "I guess..fine. But if anyone gets killed, it's not my problem, got it?"

Max had nodded eagerly, already scrambling off to call the rest of the group.

"I'm counting on you to keep those dumbasses in line!" Steve had said. "And Max." He grabbed the handlebars of her bike, his voice serious. "They don't know about..."

"They don't know about you and Billy, and you don't want them to know. Don't worry," Max smiled breezily. "I got it."

Steve blew out a breath and patted her on the shoulder. "Good woman." And then she was off. Steve had stood there for a moment, hands on his hips, watching her bike away, before snapping back to it. What was he waiting around for? There was a party to plan.

The day of the party, Steve feels off.

He wakes in his bed with Billy, like usual. His parents are away on two different trips - his dad for work, his mom to some clear-water island - and have been for a few weeks, so there's no need to worry about them getting caught, or anything. Steve stares at the ceiling for a second, trying to catalog his body. Nothing hurts. He doesn't still feel tired. He actually tends to fall asleep pretty quickly when Billy's in bed with him, which is more than he can say for when he sleeps alone.

And Billy didn't have a nightmare last night or anything - Steve usually can't fall asleep again after that happens. His eyes feel fine; his head doesn't hurt; his fingers and toes are wiggable. All of Steve seems accounted for, but something still feels strange. Out of place. Steve sighs and rolls over in bed, blinking.

The sun lights Billy golden and casts a dark shadow beneath his long eyelashes. He's still asleep, lips and cheeks soft and smooth. His hands are tucked up under the pillow, and the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest is soothing; steady. Steve feels a rush of affection, and resists the urge to run his fingers through Billy's hair. It's been growing out, and now it's just long enough to grab onto.

As Steve stares at Billy's face, trying not to move or breathe or think too much, Billy stirs, shifting against the sheets. He smiles before he opens his eyes like he can feel Steve watching him. He probably can - they've all developed a sixth sense for that sort of thing - and blinks. His eyes are so, so blue.

"Hey." Billy's voice is throaty and deep and dry with sleep, and Steve wishes he could live inside that sound. He wants to tell Billy that. That there's nothing he wants more than to live inside Billy's body, curled underneath his sternum, hugged by his ribs and wet organs, warm and throbbing and safe and protected. That he wants to push against Billy's chest hard enough that it cracks open, wide enough that he can fit inside, and hear nothing and see nothing but Billy's churning blood and the beating of his living, breathing heart.

"Hey," Steve says instead. He tries to smile, but it gets stuck somewhere in between his brain and his mouth and comes out wonky and crooked. Billy pulls Steve's hand into the space between them and threads their fingers together. He kisses Steve's knuckles, slowly,

softly, one-by-one. Steve feels like he could cry. He closes his eyes.

"Hey, hey," Billy says quietly. He presses a hand against Steve's chest, and Steve opens his eyes to look down at it. Flesh against flesh. "Are you okay?"

Steve instinctually nods his head, yes, but the second he moves his eyes start to glass over, and Billy blurs in front of him. He swipes a hand across his face before any tears can fall. Billy watches him carefully.

"I'm fine," Steve says, like it's the end of the conversation. "I'm fine, and it doesn't matter anyway." He pushes himself up and climbs out of bed. He's naked except for his underwear, and it's cold, for some reason, even in the dead of summer. He shivers. "It's getting late, and I have to get everything ready for Mike's party." Steve is halfway to the bathroom before he realizes Billy still hasn't moved.

"Are you coming?" He knows he sounds impatient, but he can't help it. He's suddenly full of energy, pulled taut like a string. "Aren't you going to help?"

Billy pushes himself up against the headboard, his oversized sleep shirt bunching around his middle. Steve doesn't like how Billy's looking at him. His expression is too reserved. Too measured. Steve wants Billy to be angry, to be upset with him for being pushy. He knows how to deal with Billy's anger. He doesn't know how to deal with whatever this is.

"I said I would help, didn't I?" Billy's tone is even, not at all malicious. He's simply asking. Steve feels like someone's popped a pin in him. He slumps over a bit, his shoulders curling in.

"I know you - Yes. You said you would help. I know you did. I'm sorry." He clenches his fingers into a fist, then loosens them. His palms are a bit sweaty, even though he'd been cold a minute ago. "I don't know why I'm being like this."

"It's okay," Billy says, but before he can make a move to get up, Steve backs into the bathroom to brush his teeth. He doesn't want Billy to touch him right now. He feels like a live wire, and he doesn't want

Billy to get hurt.

Technically, today is the day before Mike's birthday, because Lucas found out through Dustin who found out through Nancy that the Wheelers are planning a special dinner the day of. Something about Ted grilling, and Karen wanting Holly to spend more time with her brother. It actually works out better this way, because the kids want the party to be a surprise, and Mike probably won't suspect anything.

They all come over a few hours early to help Steve and Billy set up: Dustin, Lucas, Max, Nancy. It's a Saturday, so Robin has to drive her sister to and from Girl Scouts, but she promises to hurry over when she's free. No one says anything about the fact that Billy is already there when they arrive at Steve's place - ignoring the front door in favor of jumping the low fence and swinging around back towards the pool, as per usual - although Steve feels Nancy's eyes on him every time they're in a room together. Streamers are hung, balloons are blown up, chairs and tables are arranged. Steve is on high alert and scrambles back into the house every time the phone rings. He says he's waiting on a call from the diner about their food, and another call from the bakery about the cake, but he doesn't tell the kids he's waiting on a third call too. A special call.

Only Billy and Steve know that the Byers family is driving to Hawkins today, not next week like all the kids expect. Steve managed to convince them to come early and stay an extra week so they could be here for Mike's party. Well, "convince" might be the wrong word. It hadn't taken El or Will or Jonathan much convincing, for obvious reasons, but eventually, after enough wheedling and sweet-talking about how much it would mean to him and all the kids and Mike, especially, Ms. Byers gave in.

The Byers are supposed to call when they leave the city, giving Steve about an hour of advance notice, an hour and a half if the traffic is slow. So between waiting for three calls, trying to wrangle the kids into actually being useful, setting everything up, and keeping track of the time, Steve's feeling a bit stretched thin.

"Dustin, what the hell!" A shout comes from across the lawn. Steve sticks his head out the back door to see Lucas and Dustin standing across from each other, each holding onto the end of a blue plastic tablecloth.

"I'm doing it perfectly!" Dustin shouts back. "It was straight before you moved it. Now it's crooked!"

"No, it looked like shit before!" Lucas yells. "I'm *trying* to fix it!"

"Idiots!" They snap to attention at the sound of Steve's voice. "I'm sure it's fine how it is! This isn't the damn Ritz. No one cares how the tables look! Please move on to something useful!" They glare at each other and grumble a bit, but start laying out paper plates and plastic silverware. Dustin follows behind Lucas, adjusting everything he does, and Lucas looks about ready to sock Dustin across the face. Steve's half a second from going over there and doing it himself when he feels a slight hand on his shoulder.

Nancy. He turns to her, and she's grinning a bit.

"If you don't let them do some things by themselves nothing will ever get done around here, you know?" She's teasing, but something about the way she says it annoys Steve.

"Yeah, I know," he bites, slapping down the stack of napkins he's holding. "I just wish they could get along for two seconds."

Nancy doesn't seem upset that he snapped at her. Just understanding, like she almost always is.

"You know them," she says wryly. "Fighting one second, hugging the next. They'll get over it, and move on to harassing you again. It's all good," she says, and something makes him think she isn't just referring to Dustin and Lucas.

"I know," Steve says again, ducking his head. "I'm sorry."

Nancy pats his cheek lovingly, and Steve feels a pang of something. Nostalgia, maybe. It makes his stomach turn uncomfortably, and he hates that he hopes that Billy's not lurking somewhere nearby, watching them.

"You're alright," she reassures, before disappearing back outside, already yelling at the boys to get a hold of themselves.

Steve feels dizzy the second her hand leaves his face, and he braces himself against the wall until it passes. *There's no time to break down now*, he berates himself. *Everyone is coming soon, and there are still decorations to arrange, and ice to get from the basement, and none of the tables have napkins or cups, and he needs to find towels for all the kids - maybe there are extras in his parents' bathroom, which he hasn't touched the entire time they've been gone - and speaking of bathrooms he probably looks like shit and is sweating all over the place, and at some point he needs to find something else to wear, and -*

"Steve," Billy says, materializing out of nowhere, a hand cemented in the center of Steve's back. "Breathe."

Steve breathes, Billy's hand steady as his chest rises and falls. Steve is still hunched over the wall, fingers splayed wide and white against it, and he's blinded by fear, for a second, that someone will see them there - Billy touching Steve - and come to the right conclusions. But then he remembers that Billy would never be so reckless and that if someone *were* there, Billy would not be touching him, and that reassures him enough to force some air into his lungs so that he can stand up straight.

"You're okay," Billy murmurs, and he means to be soothing, and helpful, but Steve has to laugh. He's sure he sounds maniacal, laughing, but doesn't think anything has ever tickled him more than Billy saying "you're okay" in this moment.

"Okay," he says, instead of what he wants to say, which is that he hasn't been okay in hours or days or maybe even years and he doesn't know how to *stop*, or how to start.

"Steve," Billy frowns, like he's finally catching on. And Steve can't be mad at him, and he doesn't mean to feel bitter, but it's too little, too late. Steve has things to do, and he doesn't have time to stand around being coddled by someone who has no idea. No *fucking* clue.

"Steve, *what* ?" he snaps, and doesn't feel the usual immediate flush of shame after. It feels good to expel some of the tension through anger.

"I'm fine. I have things to do. Leave me alone." He brushes past Billy, ignoring the naked look of hurt that's undoubtedly on his face - the look Billy only ever allows Steve to see, no one else - and steps out into the blazing heat of the afternoon, napkins under his arm, plastic cups in hand.

He'll deal with the repercussions later. He'll - he'll think about all this shit later. If he stops moving now - well, it's not an option. Mike will be here soon, dropped off by his parents, and then the Byers, and then everything will be chaos, and Steve wants to make this a good party. The kids deserve that, at the very least.

It all goes shockingly well. Mike is surprised by everything and looks like he's tearing up as the kids mob and hug him, wishing him a happy birthday. Nancy, Steve, and Billy watch them jump and swarm around him, patting him on the back and excitedly waving poorly-wrapped presents.

There are some snacks around, which the kids pick at, and Steve tells them they better swim now before the food gets here because there's no way he's letting them in the water right after they stuff themselves, so they all go tearing into the house to change into their suits.

Steve hands each of them a towel on their way back out, which they predictably throw on the concrete before cannonballing in, and soon the backyard is filled with the sound of them yelling and splashing and kicking.

Steve avoids Billy like the plague, puttering around cleaning up after the kids, even though he knows they're going to tornado right back through and mess everything up again in two seconds. It only takes a few minutes of this cat and mouse game for Billy to get the point, and he settles into a lawn chair near the pool to stay out of the way, and watch.

There's a can of coke between Billy's bare thighs, jean shorts short and tight enough that Steve can barely see them when Billy's sitting down, and he's wearing a frayed red band t-shirt. A lit cigarette hangs

from his fingers, and as Steve watches, he takes a slow drag. He's not supposed to smoke, not really - his lungs and entire chest area took a massive beating from the Mind Flayer - but Steve knows he still occasionally sneaks one when he's upset.

Steve bites back a surge of guilt, then feels angry at himself for feeling guilty. No. It's not his fault. He just can't deal with the hovering right now, and it's even worse that it's Billy hovering, somehow. He doesn't know why.

Steve forces himself to look over at the pool to avoid his gaze automatically falling on Billy, who he can feel watching him. The kids are fine, of course, playing some version of chicken that's probably going to get way too violent way too fast. Nancy sits at the edge in a dark blue one-piece, her feet kicking at the water. She cracks open a can of root beer and tilts her head to drink it, and suddenly all Steve can see is her standing by the side of the pool, shotgunning a beer, and Barb, slicing her thumb instead of the can, and the dark blood that bubbled up from the cut.

Steve swallows, and Nancy looks over at him and smiles big, waving him over, but before he can go to her, the doorbell rings.

The kids don't move from the pool - they probably think it's just the food being delivered - but Steve feels relief fill his chest. He doesn't exactly know why - adding more people to the fray will probably make things worse - but he welcomes the temporary distraction from Nancy and Billy and his thoughts.

Steve pauses when he gets to the front of the house, suddenly nervous. He runs his fingers through his hair and smooths down his white t-shirt. There are probably grass stains on his jeans, and he can feel sweat budding from his pores, and his hands feel a bit sticky with soda, but there's no time to clean up now. Steve blows out a breath and opens the door.

El is there, front and center, practically bouncing on her toes. She's wearing some kind of pastel button-down tucked into oversized, belted jean shorts, and her hair is a bit past her shoulders now, half of it swept up into a bright yellow scrunchy. She's only been gone for a year, but she feels immeasurably older than fifteen, and part of



Steve is terribly sad that she's growing up. But he's also glad she's finding herself, and that she has a family now, and that she can go to school and live a normal life.

El throws herself at Steve, hugging him around the middle, and then another pair of arms are wrapping around him, and it's Will. Oh, sweet Will. He's lost the bowl cut, but his hair is still a bit long and floppy, and he keeps tucking the ends behind his ears, where they curl up a bit. He's got a backpack slung over his shoulder, and Steve can see the antennae of some unknown machine sticking out. Steve huffs as he presses them close. He's sure the kids will get a kick out of whatever that thing is.

"We missed you, Steve," El whispers into his chest, and Will nods against him, and something in Steve's stomach loosens a bit. But before he can really say anything, they're tearing off through the house, making a beeline for the back door.

"Party's outside, food is still on its way, but there are snacks and soda!" He yells after them. "No running by the pool!"

Someone chuckles, and he turns back around to see Jonathan, smiling. He's standing somewhat bashfully, hands tucked into his front jean pockets, but he's got some color to him, and he looks good. He looks happy. Steve pulls him into a hug, laughing along with him, and even though they've been through their ups and downs, he's glad to have Jonathan and Nancy as friends. He's missed seeing Jonathan, he really has.

"How are you?" Steve holds Jonathan at arm's length and scrutinizes him, only because he knows it'll make him blush. It does.

Jonathan opens his mouth to respond, but his words get swallowed by a chorus of shrieks from the back, followed by cries of "Will! El! Oh my god!" and lots of laughing and whooping and exclamations of surprise. Jonathan laughs at that, and Steve can't help but smile. The kids' joy is so infectious, sometimes.

"I'm good," Jonathan starts. "It took some getting used to at first, but I think I'm really liking Indianapo-" he cuts off, staring at something over Steve's shoulder, and when Steve turns, he sees Nancy there,

hair tousled as if she'd run into the house. They look at each other, frozen, as if each of them can't believe the other is standing in the same room. Steve pats Jonathan on the shoulder.

"Go," he urges, nodding his head towards Nancy. "We'll catch up later, I promise. Go."

Jonathan seems dazed, but he squeezes Steve's hand before stepping forward and practically falling into Nancy. Steve turns back around before they kiss, and there standing in front of him is Ms. Byers.

Steve doesn't know what it is about her that does it. Maybe it's her slightly oversized...well everything, and her orange keds. Maybe it's that she's shorter than he remembers, and slighter. She's always so imposing in his memory, and she commands a room so well that he always forgets she can't be taller than 5'3. Maybe it's how she pulls him close, tugging him down to her level, and that she smells like cinnamon and chapstick and exhaust fumes.

Steve doesn't know why, but the second he's wrapped up in Ms. Byers' hug it's like the beast is cut loose. He doesn't cry, not exactly, but some of the inexplicable emotion that's been twisted up in his body all day bleeds out, and he sags into Joyce's arms. He breathes out a long shudder and only pulls away when Ms. Byers does. He tries to be surreptitious, but she clearly sees him wipe at his eyes. She smiles, a little sadly, and doesn't let go of Steve where she's holding his hand.

"Are you okay, Steve?" she asks, in that way of hers that makes him really want to tell her. And he would have, probably. Told her. All about him and Billy, and about the bubbles of dread beneath his skin that just won't go away. But he doesn't get the chance.

"Mooooommmmm," Will shouts from outside. "Mom, we need you!"

Both of them know nothing's really wrong, not with Nancy and Jonathan and Billy out there, but that doesn't stop either of them from jumping a little bit.

"I'm fine," Steve answers, quickly, and gently pushes Ms. Byers down the hall. "Go, Ms. Byers. I'll come right after you."

"Oh, please, Steve," she laughs a little. "I think after everything you've earned the right to call me Joyce."

"Oh. Okay. Joyce," Steve tries out, and he feels a little color rise to his cheeks.

Joyce gives his shoulder a squeeze before hurrying off. He knows she won't feel relaxed until she knows for sure that Will's alright. It's just how things are these days.

Steve blinks back tears as he faces the front yard. The street is empty, and a slight breeze blows past, cooling the wetness on his face. It's summer, so it's nowhere close to getting dark, but the sun will start to set in a few hours, and the fireflies will come out. Steve scrubs at his face and closes the door.

Robin arrives just after the food, and they all sit around in various states of undress, munching on sandwiches and wings and pizza. The kids convinced Steve to mess around with them in the pool for a while, but he's long since changed back into his regular clothes, wet hair dripping irritatingly on his neck. The radio plays a slew of pop songs El and Max and Lucas sing along to, and Dustin, Mike, and Will puzzle over the contraption Will brought, pausing in their heated discussion to slurp sodas and peel slices of pepperoni off their pizza.

Robin talks to Billy, and Steve stares at them long enough that there's no way they aren't aware of him watching. He doesn't think he's ever seen Robin and Billy really talk before. They've exchanged words when Billy comes to hang around at the video store, but other than that they haven't had much of a chance to speak. But they seem okay now, smiling and gesticulating. Steve clenches his jaw and forces himself to pay attention to what Joyce, Jonathan, and Nancy are talking about in front of him. A new Leica store, or something.

The bakery delivers the cake, and they sing. Mike blows out the candles and makes his wishes, and they all sit around under the soft red glow of the sunset while he opens his presents. A watch from

Lucas that can go underwater and has a secret compass compartment. A VHS tape of Alien from Dustin. Cool, geometric sticker decals for his bike, from Max. Will and El went in together on a vaguely beat-up, second-hand Atari that Mike, of course, loves. And then, slowly but surely, the kids get tired, and everyone sets out for home.

Joyce helps clean up first, of course, and makes the kids pitch in, but soon after the sun disappears behind the tree line, cars are pulling out of Steve's driveway. Nancy takes Mike, Lucas, and Dustin, and Joyce and Jonathan take Will, El, and Max, who gives Steve a knowing look before asking if she can sleep over at the place the Byers are renting out for the few weeks they're in Hawkins. (Joyce says yes, of course, she'd be happy to have Max, and glances between Billy and Steve a few times before she leaves.) Eventually, all that's left is Robin, Billy, and Steve.

Steve can sense that Robin's hanging around because she wants to say something to him, and Billy seems to know it, too, because he puts out his cigarette on the brick retaining wall around Steve's house and steps inside the back door, eyes shadowed.

Robin sits on a lawn chair, crinkled purple dress spread out across her knees, and pats an empty one. Steve has a gripping sense of déjà vu as he settles beside her, but he shakes it away.

"You look pretty," he tells Robin before she can start talking. And he means it. She's got some nice color coordination going, with her pink cheeks, purple dress, and blush-colored Mary Janes. They're covered in little stickers and rhinestones that Robin probably did herself, and they twinkle when she shifts her ankles, the outdoor lights catching the shiny plastic.

"You charmer," Robin rolls her eyes, but she's smiling.

"Seriously, though," Steve insists. "Thank you for coming. I'm really glad you could make it." He's really glad Robin was there as a buffer between him and Billy, actually, because Steve's been an ass today and he doesn't know why and he doesn't know why he feels like he can't settle down in his skin and he isn't exactly sure if his heart should be beating this fast. Steve says none of this out loud, but he thinks she gets his message. He hopes she does.

"That's what friends are for," Robin teases, and then she leans forward onto her elbows, her dress rustling. "So. I talked to Billy."

Steve tenses. "I noticed."

"And I'm not here to get in between you guys," Robin continues as if he hasn't spoken. "I'm really not. But I know you think he's pissed at you..."

"Yeah, no shit," Steve bites, and then feels bad about it. Robin waves a hand.

"But he's really not, Steve. I think you should talk to him. *Really* talk to him. About what's been going on with you. He may understand more than you think." Robin stands and pulls him close, and kisses him on the head.

"Talk to him," she urges again, stepping back. "I'll let myself out. See you at work tomorrow. I love you." And then she disappears around the side of the house, shoes squeaking as she goes.

Steve sits on the lawn chair until he starts to shiver.

It's not cold; he rationally knows that. Hawkins only ever gets down to about 65 this time of year, and it's probably not even that low right now. The air feels heavy and sticky like it's going to rain tonight, and Steve is sweating through his t-shirt. But he's also shivering, or shaking, or something, and his teeth are chattering so hard it hurts his jaw.

Steve steels himself and lurches out of the chair in one big motion, breathing sharply through his nose at the stiffness in his legs. He really has no idea how long he sat here after Robin left; he just knows that he needs to get inside. It's probably late.

But Billy's somewhere in the house, part of him argues, and he doesn't want to talk to Billy. He doesn't want to deal with that - with what he's done. But then Steve remembers Robin's words. *I think you should talk to him*. So he folds his arms tight over his stomach and goes inside.

Billy's not lurking right inside the back door like Steve expects. Nor is he in the kitchen, or the dining room, or the living room. Steve walks around the whole bottom floor, turning off lights and making sure everything perishable is in the fridge, and he doesn't see any signs that Billy has been in the house today at all. It's so quiet that for a second Steve thinks Billy snuck out and went home while he was outside, but then he walks past the coat rack by the front door and gets a whiff of cigarette smoke, and he sees Billy's leather jacket there. On the coat rack. Next to Steve's old basketball hoodie, and a random baseball cap, and a raincoat Steve's father never wears.

Steve reaches out and carefully fingers the worn, smooth sleeve, nails catching on a small tear by the cuff. Something unnamable wells up inside him, and he feels lightheaded.

It's ridiculous to get emotional about something so inconsequential, Steve tells himself. But it's not often that Billy does anything he's not explicitly told to do. Shoes thrown across the foyer, dirty shirts kicked into corners, cigarettes stubbed out in the dregs of two-day old mugs of coffee. If Neil hadn't told Billy to do it, Billy didn't, in some daring, silent act of defiance that usually resulted in him getting yelled at, or slammed against a wall, or worse. And now that Neil is gone and Susan's backed off from Billy to the point of not parenting him at all (as if she'd ever gotten the chance to, with Neil around), Billy barely has any rules to follow.

Billy picks up his socks when Steve asks him to, of course, if they're in Steve's room, but it's not instinctual. He never goes out of his way to keep Steve's room as neat as Steve usually does. But he hung his jacket on the coat rack when he came in. Steve hadn't even noticed.

Steve runs his hand over the jacket one more time before pulling away. He feels a visceral need to talk to Billy right now, so sudden and overwhelming it steals the air right out of his chest.

Steve must climb the stairs, and walk down the hall, and open the door to his bedroom, but he doesn't remember any of it, because the next thing he sees is Billy sitting on the edge of his bed, thumbing through one of Steve's old books from English class. He's wearing the

same red tee and jean shorts as before, but he's kicked his high tops off and is now just sitting there in his dusty white socks. The ones Steve chose for him, with the little blue stripes around the top.

Billy looks so normal and calm, like Steve didn't do anything - like everything is fine - and Steve is so frustrated he wants to scream, but he can't even get that out. Billy looks up at him where he's still standing there in the doorway and doesn't do anything. He just regards Steve, and waits for him to make the first move.

And Steve is *trying* - *god* - he's trying, but he can't get enough air into his lungs to breathe, much less speak. Steve's hand flies up to his chest almost involuntarily, pressing hard, like there's an obstruction there that needs to be cleared, but no matter how hard he tries nothing happens, and the pressure doesn't go away. And that just makes his heart beat faster and faster and faster.

Steve's gotten like this before; he *knows* that, and it's always fine, afterward, he's always fine, but that doesn't make it feel any less like he's going to shake right out of his skin. The panic crawls all over him, real and tangible, and he can't make it go away no matter how much he focuses on his breath, and no matter how hard he forces his chest to rise and fall in a steady cycle. Rise. Fall. Rise. Fall.

Steve blinks as tears drip down his face. He hadn't even noticed he was crying. The room gets squiggly, and Steve doesn't realize Billy's gotten up from the bed until he's right there, half a foot from Steve's face.

"Steve," comes Billy's voice, soft and floaty and far away. Billy takes Steve's hand from where it's still fisted against his chest and leads them across the carpet. Steve tries to focus on the feeling of Billy's palm against his, and the familiar sensation of it, and not tripping over Billy's heels, and then his shins hit the edge of his bed and he drops down.

Steve instinctively curls down, pressing his arms against his stomach, and Billy is there a second later, palms large and warm on Steve's back and arms. Steve absently realizes that Billy's never even seen him like this before - not this bad - so he's probably freaking out just as much as Steve is. He doesn't know what to do to help, and Steve

can't focus enough to *make it stop*.

But Billy's closeness, and his soothing, murmured words *are* helping. Slowly but surely, Steve feels himself loosening. His hands start to uncurl where they're clenched against him. He feels his chest begin to settle, and a bit of air bleeds back into his lungs. Steve takes a shallow breath, eyes closed, and shudders through the exhale, willing himself to relax.

Steve isn't sure how much time has passed when he finally opens his eyes, but spots pop in his vision, the lamplight harsh and startling. He blinks several times to clear them, and somehow only then realizes that Billy's holding him around the chest, cradling him close.

"Steve?" Billy asks softly, right behind Steve's left ear. He barely raises his voice, but the sound is loud enough to break the suffocating silence of the room.

Steve snaps back to himself all at once. He feels too open and vulnerable, and he slowly pulls himself away from Billy, trying not to offend. Billy lets him go, reluctantly, and Steve shifts until he's sitting up on his own. He lets Billy keep his hand.

Steve can feel Billy watching him, waiting for an answer, or an explanation, but he's too embarrassed. He can't - he just can't. Steve looks down at his blue bedspread, the same he's had for years now, and it feels soft and worn under his palm. His parents bought it at the same time as Steve's new bed frame when he'd caught a growth spurt and started having to lie horizontally across his mattress to fit.

Steve's suddenly reminded of a time, years ago, when he caught a bad flu from a girl in his eighth-grade class, and he'd been mostly bed-ridden for a week. He remembers feeling both weightless and heavy, his body not his own, head stuffed with congestion and eyes burning. One night, when his fever was so high it gave him a vicious headache, his mother sat on top of his comforter, wiping at his forehead with a cold washcloth. She'd kissed him on the cheek, and smoothed his sweaty hair out of his eyes.

Steve surfaces from the memory when Billy calls his name again, gently, and snatches his hand away from the comforter. He looks up.



Billy looks like he always does. Beautiful. Ethereal, with a hard edge. That reassures Steve, somehow. Billy's apparent sameness. Maybe everything hasn't changed, because here Billy is, the same as he was yesterday and will probably be tomorrow. Maybe Steve didn't ruin today, because it is technically still today, and Billy is still here.

Steve looks down at where their hands are intertwined, Billy's tan fingers in his. He traces a nail over a burn mark on Billy's pointer, watching how the puckered flesh turns white.

"I'm sorry," Steve starts, looking up. Billy's eyes widen slightly, but he says nothing. There's another short silence as Steve tries to gather his thoughts. His head feels scattered.

"I didn't mean to snap at you today. I know you were trying to help. I just..." Steve fumbles over his words and rubs the back of his hand along his forehead in frustration. "I don't know. How to explain this, really."

"It's okay," Billy says, and Steve isn't used to hearing him sound so gentle. "Take your time." Steve nods and knocks his knees against Billy's. He breathes in, and out.

"Sometimes, I get...weird." It sounds lame and flat and vague, but that's the only way he can think to describe it. "And it's like my head isn't right, or my brain doesn't really want to listen to my body. And sometimes I hurt people I don't want to hurt."

Billy nods reassuringly, and Steve forges on.

"And I guess today I just woke up and felt so pent up and upset and nervous for no reason and it just kept getting worse and worse. And all the kids and the chaos and the things to plan didn't help, but I couldn't do anything about it - of course - I mean how stupid would it be if I canceled Mike's party because I felt a bit anxious." Steve's mouth dips into a frown.

"I guess I feel like I owe you a real explanation for all this because I...this isn't the first time this has happened. And it won't be the last. This is just how I am. And..." Steve scrubs both hands over his face, and stands suddenly, turning half away.

"And if you think it's too much that's fine. I understand. You're already going through so much on your own and it makes sense if you don't want to add my shit to your list of things to worry about."

Everything in Steve's bedroom is still. So still that, for a second, he thinks Billy snuck out the door and left him standing there dumbly in the center of the carpet. But then he hears Billy sliding off the bed, and sees movement out of the side of his eye.

Billy slides into Steve's line of sight, right in front of him, and grabs him by the wrists.

"Nothing," he says - and the urgency in his voice is so fierce that it tilts into being frightening - "Nothing would make me just up and leave you. Especially not that. Steve..." he trails off, and he sounds pained. There's a twist to his mouth that makes Steve's heart thud.

"I care about you. A lot. I don't know if that's been obvious at all. Clearly, emotions are not my strong suit. Or whatever." Billy ducks his head and rubs at the back of his neck, and Steve wants to push his fingers through Billy's cropped hair.

"But I really care about you. And it doesn't matter to me what sorts of fucked up your mind is. Have you seen me?" He laughs, short and self-deprecating, and Steve can't help but smile a little along with him. Billy tugs Steve forward, and Steve lets out a surprised little *oomph* as he collapses against Billy's chest. They both laugh again, genuine this time, and Billy hooks his chin over Steve's shoulder. They breathe hot onto each other's necks, and Steve feels warm, warm.

"Thank you for telling me," Billy murmurs. "I'm not mad at you. I was never mad. Annoyed, maybe a little bit. But mostly worried."

"Okay." Steve's voice is muffled by Billy's shirt, and the room settles into silence. They sway, slightly, wrapped around each other.

"And I want you to know for real-" Billy pauses, grimacing. Chews his words for a second. "I want you to hear me say this. Again. As many times as it takes. I care about you a lot. More than I can even fucking really say. And I'm here for you whenever you need me. It would be

pretty messed up of me to not be there for you when you've - done what you've done. You've helped me so much, Steve." He sniffs, short and soft, and Steve's breath catches in his chest.

Billy pulls back a little and wipes at his eyes roughly. "God," he rasps. "Anyway. Yeah. Thank you. For. You know." Steve nods, because he won't make Billy say it. He hangs his head back over Billy's shoulder and breathes in the smell of him. Cigarettes and leather and sweat and strong soap.

"Thank you for putting up with me, I guess," Steve murmurs, and Billy huffs.

"We put up with each other," he says into Steve's neck. "We look out for each other."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Remind me to never write a chapter this long ever again. It literally doubled the word count of this story. Editing it was Terrible.

Despite all that, I hope you enjoyed the Steve angst (my favorite). Funnily enough, I wrote the most emotional parts of this chapter when I was feeling as terrible as Steve is in the story, so art really does imitate life I guess!

The next chapter might take me some time because it is way outside my comfort zone, but we shall see how it goes. Again, I have no plan for when I'm going to end this story (I guess once I get tired of it/ too busy), but thank you for following along this far!

tldr: I love you all (and comments)!

## 5. Chapter 5

### Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter takes place the night of Mike's party, right after the events of the last chapter. Steve and Billy have sex, and basically nothing else happens, so if you're not into that feel free to ignore this!

That night it rains.

A summer storm is what Steve's mother would call it. When the day is so beautiful and warm and soft, and at night the heavens open up and drench the world. Summer storms always come fast and hard and leave things dripping and tree branches snapped in half and the ditches on the side of the road swirling and flooded with mud.

As Steve dries his face in the bathroom mirror, he listens to the rain pounding the windows, and the intermittent claps of thunder and lightning. He regards himself. His hair is fluffy and wayward without product, and there are dark circles under his eyes that he prays will go away with a little sleep because right now he looks kind of like a ghost. Not that it matters much, this late. He doesn't have anywhere to go. Steve runs a hand through his hair, trying to straighten out just some of the strands, and absently hopes that he remembered to bring everything important inside from the party, and that the lawn chairs don't blow away in the torrent outside.

Steve rubs some lotion into his face and hands before flicking off the bathroom light. He steps back out into his bedroom, looking up, and smiles.

Billy sits on top of Steve's comforter, legs crossed at the ankles, worrying at his bottom lip with his teeth. He's got the same book from earlier in his hand - the old one from Steve's English class - and he seems genuinely invested in whatever's going on. His fingers are soft and delicate where they hold the pages open, and a sliver of tan skin is visible above his shorts where his shirt has come untucked a

bit in the front.

It *kills* Steve to see Billy like this. He cherishes every vulnerable moment they get together - any time Billy is relaxed and unaware of how he's holding himself. He's usually so guarded and tense, even when he doesn't mean to be, and seeing him on Steve's bed - reading Steve's book - is so unbelievably gentle that Steve feels a desperate rush of affection, so heady and strong it makes him dizzy. Billy is beautiful, lying there, and he's always there for Steve - *always* - and his hair is so short and almost fluffy in this half-light, and Steve just wants to -

Steve crosses the room in four big strides and clambers up onto the bed, straddling Billy's legs. Billy makes a sound of surprise, turning his face up to look at Steve, and just manages to shove the book to the side before Steve is dragging his head back by his hair and kissing him.

Billy's lips are chapped and dry, and he's so warm up close, skin radiating heat like a furnace. Steve kisses him slow and sweet and hard, and when his cheeks start to flush from the effort of it, he pulls his fingers down from Billy's hair and wraps them delicately around his face instead. Billy's cheeks are smooth between his palms, and Steve strokes his way down Billy's ears and jaw as they kiss. He feels desperate and flayed open, and he wants, he wants, he wants, he-

"Stevie," Billy gasps a warning, pulling back a little so he can catch his breath. He says it sweetly - he always sounds sweet when calling Steve a pet name, his lips turning up a bit at the end of it - but it doesn't stop Steve from feeling a flash of self-consciousness as he pants on Billy's lap.

But then Billy rubs a hand down Steve's chest and catches his fingers on the edge of one of Steve's nipples, and the sensation curls something pleasant in Steve's stomach, and he doesn't feel so self-conscious anymore.

Steve leans forward until his forehead bumps against Billy's. Their noses touch, and Billy's breath fans warm across Steve's chin. He can feel Billy looking up at him through his eyelashes, and his gaze is heavy and wet.

“What do you want, Steve?” Billy sounds measured enough when he says it - in control - but Steve feels the slight shift of Billy’s fingers against his chest, and the way his breath stutters over the words.

“You,” Steve breathes, and he isn’t like Billy - he can’t even begin to hide how much he means it. He *wants* deep and hot and hard in his stomach, and he’s shaking with it. It’s not like the shaking from earlier today - it’s not panicked, or terrible, or nauseating. Steve shakes because there’s not enough space inside of him for all of this want, this desire. He needs to do something with it. He wants Billy to have it. He wants to make Billy feel so fucking good.

“Fuck,” Billy whispers softly, pulling Steve closer to him, and Steve realizes that he’s said at least some of that out loud. Redness flushes up his neck, but Billy just tucks their faces back together and licks his way into Steve’s mouth, easy and firm.

“I got you,” he murmurs against Steve’s lips, and Steve feels a sharp tug of pleasure low in his gut. Steve rolls his hips over Billy’s, and they brush against each other for a second, and they’re both so very hard. Billy curses again, too quiet for Steve to hear, and his eyes fall closed against the sensation.

“I want to make you feel good,” Steve says again, his throat raw with it. They’ve had sex before - him and Billy - but he hasn’t quite worked himself up to this place yet. This moment of asking Billy to trust him completely, to let him do what he wants. To make Billy *feel* and breathe and relax entirely into the moment. And this is all Steve ever wants to do. It’s part of his core, this need to make others feel good. His own pleasure is always at the back of his mind. It makes Steve feel good to make other people feel good, and he’s desperate with the desire to make Billy fall apart. He wants it so badly he doesn’t know what he’ll do if Billy says no.

“Can I...” Steve trails off, but they both know what he’s asking. *Can I take you apart?*

Billy’s eyes flash open, and his pupils are wide and dark. Steve runs a finger over the bit of Billy’s collarbone that sticks out of the top of his shirt, and Billy breathes out, short and shallow.

“Yeah,” Billy says, and he already sounds wrecked, like the admission takes something out of him. “Yeah, yes, do whatever the fuck you want. I trust you.” Steve kisses him again, sweet and short.

“I love you,” he says, kissing his way down Billy’s neck and chest. “I love you. I love you. I love you.”

Billy nods along with Steve’s words, eyes closed again as if the darkness is the only way he can bear with this much attention, and then Steve bites at his nipple through his shirt, and he gasps in surprise. His dick twitches against Steve’s leg, and Steve feels a flush of pride and warmth. Steve does it again, tentatively, and Billy’s breath catches, and Steve dazedly can’t believe that Billy’s never let him do this before. Never let Steve touch him like this, without distraction.

Steve pulls at Billy’s shirt, trying to ruck it up over his head, and there’s a slight pause and flurry of movement as they both shimmy awkwardly out of their clothes. Steve has to roll off of Billy to get his jeans down over his thighs, but soon they’re both in their underwear, panting. Billy lies against the pillows on his back, and everything about him is sharp and tense. His dick is a hard line against his underwear and his fingers are clenched against his sides and he looks oddly cold and vulnerable. The scars that cross Billy’s chest and arms stand out starkly against his summer-brown skin, twisted and overlapping and jagged. Billy’s chest rises and falls as he breathes, quick and fluttering.

“I’m here,” Steve murmurs, laying himself flush against Billy’s stomach. “I’m here,” he says again, and he kisses Billy until his limbs soften and some of the tension bleeds out of him.

“I’m gonna make you feel so good, Billy. So good.” Billy shudders as Steve slides down his body until he can kiss at Billy’s chest. He licks one of Billy’s hard nipples into his mouth, pressing his tongue flat against it, and Billy whimpers softly - just once - but the sound sends a stab of arousal straight to Steve’s dick.

Steve’s so overwhelmed by this - by Billy’s vulnerability, by his pleasure - and it takes all his effort not to sit up and breathe in the sight, or cave and take Billy’s dick into his mouth right then and

there. But he wants it to be good for Billy. Good and slow. So Steve rolls Billy's other nipple through his fingers, gently, because he can tell Billy's sensitive here, and when the skin beneath his tongue feels overworked, he switches sides and licks and tongues again and again until Billy is rolling underneath him, desperate and lost in the feeling.

Billy's hips seem to be moving on their own now, canting up against Steve's stomach, searching for friction, and he's making these delicious, desperate sounds that rock Steve to his very center. Steve is content to lie here forever, Billy's nipples between his fingers and his teeth, but then Billy grinds himself up into Steve in a way that feels intentional, his dick pressing hard against Steve's hip.

"I need..." he starts, and the words sound thin and worn between his teeth. Steve looks up at Billy, rubbing the pad of his thumb up and down Billy's spit-slick nipple.

"What do you need, Billy?" Steve kisses the center of Billy's chest and strokes his left hand down Billy's side in an attempt to settle him. Billy's practically shaking, trembling against Steve. "Tell me what you need."

Distantly, Steve remembers that it's raining, and he hears the rapid patter of water on the roof again, and the slow rumble of thunder in the distance.

"I need-" Billy starts again, then breaks off into a moan when Steve twists his nipple. "I need *more*." The admission is strangled, almost bitten off at the end, but Steve hears, and he understands. A shiver runs through him, and he mouths at Billy's nipples a few more times before pulling away.

"I got you," Steve reassures, fingers long and solid against Billy's ribs. "I got you." Billy flushes and keens a little, and Steve has to fight to keep himself calm, no matter how much he wants Billy's dick in his mouth *right now*. Billy needs it slow; he reminds himself. He needs it careful.

Steve kisses his way back over Billy's stomach, but this time he moves with purpose. He slides down until his face sits at Billy's hips,



hands braced on the outsides of Billy's thighs. It's awkward, this position - Steve's calves are flopped off the edge of the bed, and he has to twist his back uncomfortably to get any leverage - but desire burns at the front of his mind, blocking all of that out. He *wants* so badly that nothing else is important. All that matters is Billy, heaving and shivering beneath him. All that matters is that Billy feels good.

Steve tucks his fingers under the edge of Billy's underwear and looks up at him. There's a silent question in his eyes. *Is this okay? Are you ready?* And Billy stares down his body at Steve, eyes half-lidded and dark in the low light of the bedroom, and nods, once. And that's all Steve needs.

Billy's underwear slides down easily and then he's naked beneath Steve, dick curved hard and dripping against his hip. Billy makes no sound, but his chest rises and falls, and his palms are pressed against the bed. Billy's never really let Steve blow him before. A few moments before a frantic, messy hand job, maybe, but never the way he likes to do for Steve. Never like this.

Steve takes Billy into his hand slowly, almost reverently. Billy nods again at Steve's questioning look, giving his assent, so Steve traces his fingers up the length of Billy's dick, gently following the veins. He pulls Billy through his hand a few times, nails grazing lightly against him, listening to Billy's tiny noises and the almost imperceptible jerks of his hips. He looks up at Billy through hooded eyes and watches the way his face twists when Steve rubs his thumb over the head of his dick, dragging some slick back down the other side. And then when Billy seems to be getting used to this slow, gentle touch, and the delicacy of his pleasure, Steve grabs Billy firmly by the base of his dick and takes it into his mouth.

Billy doesn't shout out, but it's a close thing. Steve thinks he hears his name in Billy's strangled gasp, but he's too busy working his tongue around the head of Billy's dick to pay much attention. Billy tastes heady and salty, and Steve loves the smell of it, and the feel of Billy's dick sitting heavy and twitching on his tongue.

Steve keeps one hand moving, twisting loosely around Billy's shaft, and the other holds Billy's trembling hips still as he bobs up and down.

He flicks his tongue back and forth over the slit, tasting the wetness there, and feels Billy lurch beneath him. He presses his tongue flat and broad against Billy's balls and licks a long, rough stripe up the side of his dick. He sucks Billy as deep into his throat as he can go, pulls off with hollowed cheeks and a slow, wet *pop*.

A strangled moan punches its way out of Billy, and he bucks up, chasing Steve's mouth. But Steve manages to hold him down, Billy's hip bones digging into Steve's palms. Steve can feel wetness on his chin and mouth, and his cheeks are flaming hot, and beads of sweat trickle down over his forehead from his hairline and he feels so vibrantly present and *alive*.

And then Billy whimpers, so quiet Steve barely hears it, and he's babbling something under his breath, over and over.

"What's that?" Steve whispers, matching Billy's tone. "A little louder." Billy says it again, just as quiet, but when Steve reaches up to thumb over one of Billy's nipples, it's like the words are forced out of him.

"Please," Billy moans, throat raw. "Please, Steve. *Please*."

Steve wants to be composed - he wants to be calm and in control like Billy always is when it's the other way around - when Steve is played sweaty and red beneath him, overwhelmed and almost in tears with pleasure. He wants to be able to be witty like Billy is, and to smirk, and to ignore Billy's cries of desperation. But the sound of Billy begging has Steve rutting against the bed, turned on out of his mind, and he can't resist.

Steve takes Billy back into his mouth, but this time there's no play. He's not teasing, and he doesn't want it slow. Steve swallows Billy down, gagging slightly as the head hits the back of his throat, and works his tongue along the underside of Billy's dick. Billy bucks and twists beneath him, and he's talking almost constantly now, bitten-off curses and desperate pleas and Steve's name.

And then Steve twists one of Billy's nipples between his fingers, nails grazing against the skin, and Billy comes with a shout. His eyes are scrunched closed, and his hips heave as he rides the waves of

pleasure, fists twisting into the comforter. Steve swallows most of it down, working Billy through his orgasm, and only pulls away when the Billy starts to twitch.

“Steve,” Billy whispers, quiet and vulnerable, so Steve crawls his way up Billy’s body and kisses him.

“That was...” Billy shakes his head. His lips are red and wet, and his usually perfectly coiffed hair is messy and out of place. He looks thoroughly fucked. Steve preens.

“You’re incredible,” is what he settles on, and Steve scoffs. But before he can deny it, and tell Billy how incredible *he* is, and how Steve barely had to do a thing, Billy is shifting underneath him, grabbing Steve’s waist with his hands. Steve’s dick brushes up against Billy’s stomach, and he suddenly remembers how hard he is, and he shivers.

And just like that, Billy’s in control. He smiles at Steve, slow and syrupy, and moves again, just a little, so the hard line of Steve’s dick presses against him, making Steve gasp. Steve scrabbles at Billy’s chest for purchase as Billy shucks his underwear down and immediately takes Steve’s dick into his hand. Billy twists just how Steve likes it, finds a pattern that makes him see stars. Steve feels so good - it feels so good - and pleasure is bursting within him, and it’s almost too much.

But then Billy is moving so he can pull Steve to him, sucking one of Steve’s nipples into his mouth, pressing it soft and wet under his tongue, and Steve rolls his hips into Billy’s hand, shaking. His breath is coming hard now, and he feels so, so close.

“Billy,” he chokes out. “Billy, Billy, Billy.”

“You’re okay,” Billy soothes. “I’ve got you. You’re so goddamn beautiful like this, Steve. *Fuck.*” Steve whines, deep in his chest, and presses himself impossibly closer.

“Come on,” Billy urges, panting into Steve’s chest. “Come on, baby. Come for me.”

And Steve comes. *God*, does he come. It punches through him so hard

he loses his breath, so hard that Steve's vision swims for a minute, and he feels himself fall against Billy. Steve shudders his way through it and slowly comes back to himself, overwhelmed by the feeling and the smell and the taste of Billy's lips pressed softly against his.

Steve blinks back to awareness as Billy pulls away. The look on Billy's face as he slips out of bed and into the bathroom is so terrifyingly soft that Steve is having trouble imagining that any of this was real. But then the sound of the rain fades back in, and Billy returns to flip the dirty comforter off the bed and wipe them both down with a wet cloth. He cleans Steve up so tenderly that Steve's eyes start to gloss over. A tear slides down his cheek, and then another, but before he can think about it too much, Billy is back, cradling Steve's face in his hands.

"Hey," he soothes, wiping the wetness from Steve's cheeks with his thumbs.

"Hi," Steve croaks, his voice shot. "I love you."

Billy blushes immediately and tucks Steve against him before throwing the blanket over them. Steve presses his cheek against Billy's warm chest, and when he breathes out, all his muscles relax into the bed.

A few minutes pass. Steve's body feels heavy and slow, and he's about to slip off into sleep when he hears Billy speaking above him.

"Thank you," is all he says, but Steve understands the weight of it. He nods, head knocking against Billy's arm.

A soft, slurred "You're welcome" is the only response Steve manages to get out before he's asleep in Billy's arms, lulled by the sound of the rain.

They both sleep soundly through the night.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Writing this chapter was...rough lemme tell you lmao

but tysm for reading and enduring my gross overuse of italics. The next chapter will be angsty again. Ok bye!

## 6. Chapter 6

### Notes for the Chapter:

Hello!! I'm so terribly sorry! Life stole me away from this story and with everything going on, I wasn't able to come back to it when I originally planned. However, I now have a vision in mind for the end of this fic, and I'm determined to execute said vision within a reasonable time frame!! If you've been waiting on this new chapter for the past year, thank you so much for holding out hope for this piece!! If you're new, thank you dearly for joining me on this ridiculous journey. I promise to not take another year to update again lol

\*\*\*warning for use of the f slur in the third paragraph

Eventually, someone finds out.

Steve has always feared this day would come. He's been preparing for it for months. During quiet moments at home, or while he unwraps and files new movies at the video store, he's been thinking. Planning. Deciding what he'd say and do if someone found out about him and Billy.

He'd try to deny it first, probably. See if he could manipulate whoever it was into doubting what they'd seen. *Kissing? Why would we be kissing? I'd rather get run over by my beemer than kiss Billy fucking Hargrove.* And maybe that would work. Maybe they'd all laugh it off, and Steve and Billy would learn their lesson and be more careful.

Or maybe whoever it was would insist that they know what they saw and that Billy and Steve are together, and what are they, some kind of fucking faggots? And then Steve would conduct a risk assessment. Were they in any danger? Could the slur turn into physical violence against them? Not many people in town would pick a fight with Billy

Hargrove, but fear and disgust and confusion made people do stupid things.

They'd run. Steve would probably have to drag Billy away—Billy would never voluntarily leave a fight—but running was safer. Running meant that no one got hurt or arrested.

Despite the fact that Steve is hyper-aware of the danger of them being seen together, he doesn't *actually* think they'll get caught. They're so careful in public. They sit across from each other at restaurants and never intentionally touch, even under the table. They try not to bump shoulders too much as they walk down the street. They avoid driving together whenever possible because it's easy to forget that people can see through the windows and that the smoky interior of Billy's Camaro isn't as secluded as it seems.

They always drop some of their walls when they're with friends, but even then... Steve doesn't think any of the kids would have a problem with it, based on how easily Max had taken it. She hadn't even needed to be told; she'd just figured it out. And Robin knows, of course, but that's different. She knows what it's like to be terrified of other people discovering her secret. She knows how it feels to have to hide.

But they still keep the touching to a minimum when the kids are over, and they try not to have very noticeable conversations. The kids know they're friends of some sort, but their relationship still puzzles Dustin and Mike, at the very least. Lucas—maybe because of Max's strategic influence—seems unbothered by their apparent friendship, but that doesn't mean they'd be fine with knowing the whole truth. That they'd even begin to understand.

So Steve and Billy kiss quickly and quietly, behind corners, and they smile at each other across rooms, and it's enough. It has to be enough.

But then, one day, everything changes.

What's funny about it, in the least funny way possible, is that they're not even doing anything. They're not kissing, or holding hands, or caught sleeping together by his parents on a surprise return home. It's nothing like that.

Steve's on the phone with his dad, pacing tightly behind the counter of the video store. He and Billy are alone there—Keith trusts Steve enough to run it by himself now, and Robin's been taking fewer and fewer shifts as she prepares to move to California for college—so it's silent aside for the low buzz of Steve's dad's voice through the receiver. Steve hasn't said a word in ten minutes. He just listens to his dad's lecture in detached silence, letting himself get to the end of the cord before he's yanked back in the other direction. He can feel Billy's eyes on him from the other side of the store, where he pretends to be flipping through the tapes, but he says nothing. He just watches Steve trip back and forth, one hand cradling the phone to his ear, the other twitching at his side.

Steve somehow knew it was his dad calling before he picked up the phone, and he knew exactly what his dad was calling about, but he answered anyway. He didn't owe his father anything, and whatever he might get out of finally addressing this *thing* that had been hanging over his head for months wasn't worth him feeling like shit first thing on a Saturday morning, but for some reason, he still answered the phone.

Steve's dad is, essentially, telling him what a piece of shit he is. It's been over a year since he graduated high school, his dad says coldly, and he's done absolutely nothing with his life. He'd gone and quit his job at his dad's office a few months ago, like an idiot, even though he could have worked there for years and had quite an impressive career, all without even having to interview for a position. He'd been working at the goddamn video store for too long. It isn't a distinguished line of work, there is no way he can move up in the world doing that kind of job, and does he really think he'll be able to afford the kind of lifestyle he's used to on that salary? Steve's dad's laugh is bitter and ugly. Steve's a disappointment and a failure, and unless he goes to college or gets a job or does something with his goddamn mess of a life, he won't be allowed to stay at home all day moping without finally paying rent like a real man.



And then he hangs up, like this isn't the first time Steve's talked to him since he quit the office job, and since his dad's been away on unspecified "business."

Steve stands there by the wall, waiting to finally feel the emotions that are always trembling beneath the surface. His anger at his dad for daring to talk to him that way—for trying to assume any role in his life at all—when he can't even hold his own family together. His bitter shame, and the terrible, gutting feeling of knowing that his dad is right. That he's wasting his life, and that he has no future, and that he's going to be stuck in godforsaken Hawkins forever, hiding who he is from his friends, working shitty jobs just to survive, becoming someone he despises.

Steve feels the overwhelming urge to sit down.

He gently places the phone back on the hook and braces himself against the counter, legs trembling. It feels like something very big and very sharp is fluttering around inside his chest, knocking against his heart and ribs and lungs. The AC hums, flooding the space with cold air, and goosebumps bubble up the back of Steve's neck.

Before Steve can slide to the floor, Billy's there across the counter, warm hands stable against Steve's arms. He smells like cigarettes and leather and salt, and it's enough to keep Steve in his own head. Stop him from floating away.

"Hey," Billy says quietly, smoothing his thumbs over Steve's skin. "Are you alright?"

Steve considers lying, but Billy knows him too well for that now. It would be nice to be alright, he muses, taking a shuddering breath. Maybe one day, he'll be able to have a conversation with his dad without wanting to crumble away into nothing afterward.

"I hate that he makes me feel like this," Steve admits, bumping his head into Billy's chest. He knows Billy understands. Understands more than Steve does, more than he ever will, and for a second, Steve's disgusted with himself. Who is he to break down after talking to his dad on the phone when Billy's had it so much worse? But it's like Billy can read his mind, because one of his hands immediately

comes up to cradle the back of Steve's head. *You're okay*, the gesture seems to say. *It's okay*.

The position is awkward, with the counter between them, but Steve doesn't think he could move if he tried. It's warm in Billy's chest, warm and soft and safe. Steve grabs at the front of Billy's t-shirt and holds on tight as exhaustion crashes over him. The rumbling of the AC is muffled by the steadiness of Billy's heartbeat, and it's the most beautiful thing Steve's ever heard.

Within seconds, the blessed stillness is interrupted by the front door of the video store squealing open and someone tumbling noisily inside. They're laughing, yelling Steve's name, and it's like time completely stops.

Steve is intensely, horrifyingly aware of how many places he and Billy are touching. Forehead to chest. Hand to neck. Fingers to shoulder. Lips to head.

Billy backs away from Steve and smoothly pulls himself together, facing the door, but it's too late. Whoever stands before them has already gone quiet. Steve presses his sweaty palms flat against the counter, swallows hard, and lifts his head.

It's Lucas. He's sweating beneath a baseball cap, skin glistening in the fluorescent light of the store, and he wears the elbow and knee pads his mom made him get when Max first started teaching him to skate. Steve can see the board thrown haphazardly on the sidewalk through the glass door. Lucas has a tape in one hand and his walkie in the other, and he stares at them with his mouth half-open in shock. The shadows from his hat make it impossible to see his eyes.

Quickly and quietly, Lucas bends over, places his tape on the carpet, and turns back to the door.

"Lucas," Steve calls, scrambling around the side of the counter, but he's already disappeared, sneakers clapping against the pavement. A surge of heat blows inside as the door slams shut.

"I'm so sorry," Billy starts to say, turning towards Steve with his palms open to the ceiling, but it's too late: Steve's already falling

apart.

He wants to tell Billy that it's not his fault, but he can't get enough air all of a sudden, and the room spins and flashes like a dream.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

I love you! Thank you for reading !! I also love comments! :)

## 7. Chapter 7

### Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all so much for your patience! This process of writing/editing this fic has been slow and sometimes difficult but we're nearly there!!

No real warnings for this one, just vague, brief mentions of homophobia/racism towards the end.

Barely a day passes before the news about Steve and Billy comes full circle. Steve imagines that Lucas went to Max first for confirmation before cycling over to Dustin's, then Mike's, picking up friends as he went. They probably had some kind of meeting in Mike's basement, sitting in a circle, conferencing in El and Will via the Wheeler's landline. In Steve's mind, it went something like this:

**Lucas:** Guys, I saw something.

**Mike:** What do you mean, *something* ? Was it a good or bad something?

**Dustin:** Please don't tell me there's another Demogorgon.

**El (through the phone):** Demogorgon?

**Lucas:** NO! No, there's no Demogorgon. I didn't see anything bad. Just...strange.

**Mike:** What was it?

**Lucas:** I...okay. Yesterday I went to the video store to return a tape. You know how we finally got that one copy of *The Goonies* , and Keith was really strict about us only keeping it for a week, and—

**El:** We've seen it on tape four times.

**Dustin:** No, you haven't.

**Will (through the phone):** We have.

**Dustin:** What?! That's so unfair—

**Mike:** Guys! What happened, Lucas?

**Lucas:** I went to return the tape, and when I opened the door, Billy was there with Steve. And they were...I don't know. Hugging.

**Mike:** Hugging?

**Lucas:** Yeah, hugging. Steve seemed really upset, and it looked like Billy was comforting him, and they were all close.

**Dustin:** Okay? So?

**Lucas:** So I didn't really think they were close enough to be hanging out alone, much less hugging! I asked Max and...

**Max:** They're dating. They've been dating for like a year or something, and before you get mad, they told me not to tell anyone. They didn't want people finding out.

**Dustin:** What?! What did they think we'd do, stop liking them?

**El:** If they told all of us, other people in town might've found out.

**Max:** And you know what Hawkins is like.

**Will:** Yeah.

**Lucas:** So now we're telling you because it's not fair that they feel like they have to hide, and we have to show them that we love them no matter what.

**Dustin:** Of course we do. We love Will and Robin, obviously. Steve's no different, and neither is Billy. Even though I don't know Billy all that well, and he still scares me a little.

**Max:** But for god's sake, nobody make a big deal of it! They'd hate that, especially Billy. Lucas and I will talk to them, and everyone else: keep your mouths shut.

**El:** Okay.

**Dustin:** Got it.

**Mike:** I wonder if Nancy knows. Or Jonathan.

**Will:** I don't know. But they'll find out if Steve and Billy want them to find out.

**Mike:** Yeah. Okay. Thanks for telling us.

**Dustin:** He couldn't *not* tell us! Party rules.

**Lucas:** Party rules.

Precisely 18 hours after he barged into the video store, Lucas shows up at Steve's house, Max in tow. It's obvious why Lucas and Max are the chosen representatives, but it feels strange nonetheless. Max is like Steve's little sister at this point, and by extension, Lucas is like his kid brother. They crash at his place all the time, whirlwinding through his snack pantry and kicking their dusty shoes up onto the coffee table, so seeing them knock and wait respectfully at the end of his doormat is strange. They're both holding skateboards, and Max is trying for a smile. Lucas looks nervous but determined.

Steve lets them in without a word and leads them toward the living room—toward Billy—even though his heart is bumping in his throat and he feels like he could keel right over. He's the adult here. He has to act like an adult.

Billy's leaning against the back of the couch when they enter, right ankle kicked up over his left knee, arms folded coolly behind his head. He looks casual and composed, but Steve (and probably Max) can see the tick in his jaw and the sharpness behind his eyes. It's like he's waiting for a sentence: innocent or guilty.

Steve sits down next to him, leaving a healthy two feet between their thighs, while Lucas and Max hover awkwardly. Lucas looks at them, then down at the floor. He opens his mouth, then closes it. He grimaces, scratches at his forehead, and just as Steve is about to take

the first step to break the silence, Max cuts in.

"I told him," she says simply, and they all hear the words she doesn't say. "I told him *about you*." Billy remains still, but even from a distance, Steve can feel the tension in his muscles.

"I told him," Max continues, shrugging hair out of her face, "Because he basically already knew. And we told the party because they needed to know, and they would've figured it out anyway because Lucas can't lie for shit, and of course, they don't care, and they love you both, really, and even though I don't regret it, I am sorry." Max breathes out hard through her nose, lips pressed together. "I'm sorry it went down this way because it wasn't our secret to tell, no matter how it happened. So yeah," she shrugs, toeing at her skateboard. "I'm sorry."

"Me too," Lucas agrees quickly. "I shouldn't have run away yesterday. I was just surprised, and I didn't really think. I'm sorry."

There's a moment of silence. Lucas and Max both look down at the floor like they're waiting for some kind of punishment. With a start, Steve sees himself in them, chin tucked into their necks, expecting an outburst of anger. It bizarrely feels like every argument he ever had with his father as a kid, every failing grade, and missed basketball practice. The thought makes his stomach turn.

Steve stands before he can decide not to and crosses the small gap between him and the kids. Lucas looks up at Steve through his eyelashes, dark eyes round and expectant, and that's all it takes for Steve to pull the two of them into a hug. Max lets out a surprised *oof*, but for once, she doesn't resist or wriggle away. She presses her cheek into Steve's sternum, and Lucas's breath hitches in what might be a sob, and something warm and sweet floods into Steve's chest like a rush of hot air.

"It's okay," Steve says, smoothing his left hand down the back of Max's head. "We forgive you," he says, patting Lucas gently on the back. Billy's there now, right behind Steve, and he bends down and gives Max a quick kiss on her forehead.

"Actually," Steve says as the kids pull back, Lucas surreptitiously

wiping under his eyes, “there’s nothing to forgive.” Max starts to shake her head, but Steve keeps going.

“I should be the one apologizing. We should,” he amends, glancing over his shoulder at Billy. Billy nods, grimacing a little. “We got so caught up in the secrecy of it that we kept things from people we never should’ve. You’re *family*, Max,” Steve urges, tapping at her chin until she looks up at him. “It wasn’t right of us to ask you to keep something like this from Lucas and everyone else. We love you all, and we trust you. It’s just...”

Steve breaks off. He doesn’t know how to explain it. The paralyzing fear that his mom will somehow catch wind of who’s been keeping Steve company while she’s gone. Or, god forbid, his father finds out who’s been sharing Steve’s bed. Steve couldn’t even begin to explain the fear they feel walking down the street beside each other, convinced that everyone they pass somehow *knows* and hates them for it. Although, Steve thinks, watching how Lucas’s long, brown fingers keep finding the pale skin at the back of Max’s elbow, maybe they don’t need that bit explained to them.

Billy gently rests a steady hand against the small of Steve’s back.

“I know,” he starts, then gruffly clears his throat. “I know we haven’t always gotten along, Max, and that’s on me. That’s my fault. And I’m going to spend the rest of my life making up for it.” His eyes are suspiciously bright, and it’s Steve’s turn to offer a steady hand. “But I just want to make sure you know that I, uh. I love you. And thank you.”

Max is silent, but her cheeks are wet, and she looks like she’s been gutted. Before Steve can move away or take a breath, Max is on them, clutching him and Billy alike, and somehow, Steve realizes, this is the first time he’s ever really seen Max cry. She’s shaking against them, and Billy’s trembling just as hard at Steve’s side, and then she reaches back and drags Lucas in. They stand there in Steve’s cavernous living room, shaking and sniffing and holding each other, and it’s warm and shameless and joyful, and there are no secrets between them, and Steve wonders, giddily, if this is the start of something good.



## **Notes for the Chapter:**

Short and sweet :)

As always, thank you for reading, and I'd love to hear your thoughts! Stay tuned for the final chapter!

## 8. Chapter 8

Somehow, someway, Steve and Billy move to California. It all starts with Robin, of course.

After a year of community college, Robin's finally heading to UC San Diego in late July to continue her degree. Going in July will give her time to settle and explore before classes kick off, or so she says, but Steve just thinks she's eager to get the hell out of Hawkins and start living her real life.

He understands. And even though he's known this was coming for months, actually being faced with the thought of Robin leaving stings. A lot. She's been a constant for Steve through all the craziness of the past year, and he's struggling to imagine his life without her.

"It'll be okay," Robin says for the third time today as she and Steve dig through her drawers. The sun's starting to set, slanting sideways through the open window, and the syrupy gold of it turns everything in Robin's bedroom into a dream: her Hidden Fortress VHS; a poster of Jodie Foster in *Carry*; a dusty, half-deflated soccer ball tossed into a corner.

Steve says nothing, just swallows and holds up a striped sweater. Robin makes a face. "Donate."

"I don't know," Steve shrugs, rolling the chunky knit through his fingers. "I kinda like it."

"Keep it then." Robin throws a faded fleece with a hole in the cuff towards the end of her bed. It slides onto the floor, scattering a pile of old plastic jewelry. "It's not like I'm gonna need too many sweaters in sunny San Diego."

She wiggles her fingers, grinning, and Steve smiles through a grimace. He knows he's being irrational. Unsupportive, even. It's not like Robin's moving to Mars. He'll still see her sometimes, and they'll talk on the phone and send letters. It's just that being here in Robin's

attic bedroom where the two of them have spent so many nights sprawled across the carpet, drinking cheap vodka swirled with mandarin orange Slice, watching movies Robin insisted were integral to Steve's so-called "film reeducation," talking about boys and girls and anything under the sun...being here and imagining it empty and lifeless and *Robin-less*...

"Hey," Robin says softly. She closes her drawer and slides across the bed. "Sit down for a sec."

Steve eyes her warily for a moment.

"Please," Robin rolls her eyes. "I'm not gonna bite you." She reaches up and undoes her ponytail, letting her hair shake down around her shoulders. It smells sharp and clean, like pine in a snowstorm.

"I'm really gonna miss you," she sighs, and Steve's heart does a painful little tug. "I'm excited about San Diego. I really am. Sun, sand —"

"Girls," Steve interjects, trying for a smile, and Robin huffs.

"Girls. But, you know. It's going to be weird not having you so close. Won't be able to just walk over to your house anymore, I guess." Robin laughs a little, sounding hollow.

"Yeah," Steve says, and it's not at all enough, but Robin doesn't seem to mind. They sit there in silence, sharing warmth through the denim where their knees touch. Robin leans all the way into Steve and rests her head on his shoulder. Her breath fans over the hollow of his neck, and it feels so much like the end of something that Steve has to swallow hard against the tightness in his throat.

The setting sun slides across the room like a spotlight, and with Robin pressed into his side, Steve watches it grow weaker and weaker until the sky turns a deep blue. As the stars begin to flit to life, sparkling across the near-dusk, a breeze slips in through the cracked window, crisp and chilling. Robin sighs and pushes up to her feet to shut the window. As she closes out the wind and the shrill ebb and flow of cicadas, Steve wonders if this is it. Is this their last time together in this room, as they are? The next time they're here, over

Christmas, maybe, Robin will have grown and changed without him. She'll have made new friends—California friends—and she'll know things Steve'll never know and have seen things Steve will never see, and when they meet in this place in the quiet of winter, it'll only be a pitstop for her. A temporary pause, a step outside of her new normal. But for Steve, the rumbling closeness of Hawkins—it's suffocating summer nights and cracking, deadly winter—will always be his normal. His life. The thought makes something acidic and barbed rise up his throat, and he grabs at Robin's comforter with his fist. *Jesus.*

"Steve," Robin says.

He looks up. She's still by the window, looking at him with that expression she gets when she's had a thought or is up to something. Eyebrows pinched, mouth twitched into a frown.

"What if you came to California with me?"

Steve hears her words, but it's like their meaning passes right through him. He blinks, then laughs.

"Yeah, right."

"No, I'm serious," Robin says, crossing the room in two purposeful strides. She sits back down next to him, then surges up again and paces back over to the window. "Think about it. You come with me to California—you and Billy, of course—and the two of you get an apartment near my dorm. And you guys can get jobs or something, and travel, and we'd be able to see each other all the time—all the damn time—and you'd get to be yourselves there. Like, really be yourselves. No more sneaking around, no more worrying about town gossip. You'd be practically invisible in San Diego." There's a familiar fire behind Robin's eyes now, and she bounces a little on the balls of her feet.

"Billy misses California—you're always telling me that—and even though you'd have to leave Max and the kids and stuff, I'm sure they'd kill for the chance to leave Hawkins to come visit you. And, you know, people grow up and stuff, and they'll understand that you can't stay in town with them forever. Hell, eventually, even they might leave and find their own lives in other places. And I know I'm

going on and on now, but the more I say, the more I think this is a really fucking great idea, you know?”

Robin braces herself against Steve, one hand on each knee. Her silver chain swings into the space between them, blinking in the low light of the room. She looks down at him, grinning, and shakes his legs a little.

“Come on, dingus. What do you say?”

Steve looks up at her, and for once in his life, his brain is silent. He knows, if he agrees to this batshit plan, that there'll be logistics to consider, and people to consult, and hard conversations to have, and boxes to pack, and goodbyes to make, and places to visit one last time. But it's impossible to think about any that with the only word that matters flashing bright in his mind like a goddamn neon sign:

“Yes.”

Someone calls while they're making dinner. Queen blasts over the radio, “Radio Ga Ga,” and they sing along so passionately that they don't hear the shrill ring until the song ends. Billy's in the middle of straining the pasta, swallowed in a plume of steam, so Steve drops his vegetable chopping knife and makes a run for it. He snatches up the phone just before the last ring and manages a breathless “Hello?”

A yell blasts through the receiver: “It's Steve!” Steve laughs and settles in against the wall as he's bombarded with loud bickering and excited chatter.

“Shut UP Dustin—”

“Will you just sit down?”

“Lucas! LUCAS!”

“El, hurry up! There's a seat right next to Mike.”

“God, Mike, can you just—”

There's a loud clatter as someone drops the phone, and a series of exasperated sighs and giggles. Fabric shuffles, bare feet slap against the wood floor.

"Hi," Max breathes into the receiver. She must sit down next to Lucas, because Steve can hear him tapping away at the handheld puzzle game Will told them about a few months ago. He must've brought it with him on his and El's mid summer visit to Hawkins.

"Hey, Max," he grins, and hears a click as she puts him on speakerphone. Billy looks over at the sound of his sister's name, waving an oven mitt. "Your brother says hi."

"Billy!" Dustin yells, voice suddenly loud as he crowds close to the phone. "How's old Billy-boy?"

"He's good," Steve laughs, glancing back towards the kitchen. Billy's hair is long again, almost down to his shoulders, and it curls gently around his neck as he bends over the stove. Steve feels a warm rush of affection at the sight.

"We're both good," he says, and he really means it. "What's up with you kids? How's it been having Will and El back for a few weeks?"

"Will let Lucas borrow his puzzle game thing," Max says, and Steve can practically feel her rolling her eyes. "He hasn't looked up from it in like four hours."

"Not true," comes Lucas's muffled voice. El snorts.

"True," she says, then lets out an *oof* as someone shoves her back into the couch cushions.

"Hey," Mike says. "Hands off my girlfriend."

"*Hands off my girlfriend*," Dustin mimics in a syrupy voice.

"Okay, okay," Steve interrupts. "Let's not forget our one rule."

"No fighting while on the phone with Steve," Will recites dutifully, and Dustin snickers in the background.

“Hey,” Steve warns. “Let’s not forget why we had to create that rule in the first place. Need I remind you of the Atari incident?”

“Nope!” Dustin says quickly. “You definitely need not remind us! It’s all up there. Seared into our brains.”

“Good,” Steve says through a smile. Before he can ask how Jonathan is, there’s a mild commotion as the phone changes hands.

“How’s California?” El asks.

“Yeah,” Max joins eagerly. “What does your apartment look like? What does Robin’s apartment look like? Have you met Robin’s roommate? Have you been to the beach yet? Have you gone swimming? Surfing?”

“Woah, okay,” Steve laughs. “Our apartment is still pretty empty, but we took some pictures and we’ll send them in a few days. Once we find the post office,” he amends, and Billy’s laugh echoes from the kitchen. “It’s small, but there’s enough space for all our stuff *and* everything you idiots snuck into our suitcases.”

“Hey! Those jellyfish books will come in handy, just you wait,” Dustin shouts from somewhere across the room.

“Anyway,” Steve continues, “We haven’t seen Robin’s apartment yet, but she and her roommate are about to come over for dinner. We also —”

“*Dinner?*” Max interrupts. “You and Billy are cooking dinner.”

Steve raises his eyebrows. “Is that so hard to believe?”

“Not you, maybe, but Billy. Definitely Billy. I’ve never seen him cook something in his life. Shouldn’t you be, you know, supervising him?” Dustin’s laugh is muffled, like he’s smothering it with his hand.

“Rude,” Steve says. “Your brother is a great cook. If you like spaghetti, spaghetti, and more spaghetti,” he whispers conspiratorially. The party erupts into raucous laughter.

“Hey!”

Steve turns around with a start to find Billy two steps away with a dish towel thrown over his shoulder and his hands on his hips. He's the picture of domesticity, with heat-ruddied cheeks and sock-feet and a look of pure warmth and exasperation on his face. He presses up against Steve so he can get his mouth near the receiver.

"Just so you hooligans know, Steve's a liar. I can cook." Uncontrollable laughter fills their ears again, followed by a loud crash that sounds like someone falling off a chair.

There's a chorus of "Billy!" and "Hey Billy!" as the laughter dies down, but before anyone can say anything else, a loud buzzing pierces the apartment.

"Sorry guys," Billy says into the phone. "Duty calls." He kisses Steve on the forehead before wheeling away to answer the door.

"That's my cue, too," Steve says regretfully.

"*Man*," Dustin whines. "Why are you guys always so busy?"

"You'll understand when you're older," Steve grins, and they all groan.

"Yeah, yeah," Max says. "Say hi to Robin for us, okay? And send us the pictures!"

"Will do," Steve agrees distractedly. "Be good for your parents! Don't drive Mrs. Wheeler crazy!" A thudding noise comes from the entryway as Robin kicks off her shoes, and her voice echoes happily down the hall.

"Dinguuuuussss," she calls. "You terrible host!"

Steve rolls his eyes. "I'll call you kids next week, alright?" There's a series of varyingly loud "byes" and "love yous," and Robin comes around the corner just as he hangs up. She's carrying a worryingly large and leafy potted plant, face split into a self-satisfied, brilliant smile. Billy hovers behind Robin, braced to catch the wavering pot, and beside him is a dark-skinned woman who must be the new roommate. The woman looks nervous, but kind, smiling hesitantly at Steve as her hands flit from the ends of her braids to her purse.



“The guests of honor have arrived,” Robin announces, sliding dramatically into the room in her baby blue lettuce-edge socks. “And they’ve brought a housewarming gift.”

Steve grins and manhandles the pot into Billy’s arms before throwing himself into Robin. She smells like flowery perfume and rich dirt and warm, early-evening sun. He tucks his face into the crook of her neck and it feels like coming home.

Before long, the apartment is filled with the comforting sounds of banging pots and pans and companionable chatter. Robin’s roommate, Janie, volunteers to finish chopping Steve’s vegetables, and she and Billy immediately engage in an intense conversation about surfing. Apparently, she’s lived in California all her life and absolutely loves the ocean.

Robin leans against the fridge. She’s supposed to be stirring the sauce, but instead, she’s staring unabashedly at Janie. The kitchen smells like tomatoes and spices, and everything is warm and soft and slightly smudgy in the encroaching dusk. Sat on the edge of the counter, watching this surreal merging of lives new and old, Steve feels a sudden burst of giddy anticipation. He has no idea where life will take him, but he finds that for once, he doesn’t mind the not-knowing. All that matters is this dreamy, idyllic moment, and Robin’s infectious laughter, and the electric colors of the sun setting over the ocean, and Billy’s wide, easy smile.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hi! Omg! You've reached the end. This fic was definitely a labor of love for me and such a long, self-indulgent project, and if you've stuck with me through my terribly irregular posting schedule, you're an angel and I love you. If you're new, hello! I also love you. Thank you so, so much for reading. I appreciate each and every one of you.

If you have any thoughts, please leave a comment! I love hearing from you!! Also, I couldn't fit this in the

story, but Robin and Janie definitely end up together, and the two couples hang out all the time. MLM/WLW solidarity :)